



POSTWAR

Daniel Eisenberg

I.

[Our] solidarity is the impossible passion one stranger can feel for another.

Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*

These stills, from *To A Brother In Asia*, come from optically printed news footage taken in mid-April, 1975. For almost two weeks, the Vietnamese People's Army and their Viet Cong allies engaged the South Vietnamese Army at Xuan Loc in the last battle of the Vietnam War, where all sides would suffer thousands of casualties. On April 29, tanks of the People's Army of Vietnam would enter the Presidential palace in Saigon.

I am looking at these images 35 years after they were taken, and 27 years after working closely with them as an editor of a television documentary about the final days of the Vietnam War. These images of the last dazed teenagers to be taken prisoner in a war that lasted decades, blindfolded and paraded before the international press during the battle have stayed with me. Given the repetition of so much similar imagery that we're subjected to in all the wars we're allowed to see, the blindfolded prisoner, the falling statue, the evacuation of the wounded, and so many others, these should not have such extraordinary resonance—but they do.

Prisoners feeling the dance of sunlight and the shadows of leaves on their blindfolds; the feeding of soup to a gravely wounded soldier, one slow spoon at a time; the bewildered look into the camera of a small boy as he's being lifted by his crying father onto the deck of a freighter in Nha Trang. In the images that flowed from the archive to the editing room, I was particularly taken by such insignificant moments. Deprived of any narrative purpose, they were most often deemed superfluous—outs. I often insisted on including some of them in the cut of the film, precisely because they communicated something outside the boundaries of narrative and time. They maintained an uncanny relationship to history, and that uncanniness came from the combination of two dissonant effects.

First, in these depictions of individuals at the edge of conflict, one immediately recognizes the singularity and ephemerality of these subjects and events, while at the same time being profoundly aware of their eternal repetition, even in our own time. At that moment of our identification with the subject, historical time is ruptured, and we see these people and these events in the present, outside their historical frame. Their moment and ours are one, as the archival image transcends

and transgresses the historical. The most famous dramatization of this phenomenon occurs in Roberto Rossellini's *Voyage to Italy*, 1953, when Ingrid Bergman breaks down upon seeing the cast corpses, frozen at the instant of their sudden death, at the ruins of Pompeii. Her utterance, "Life is so short," echoes at once the banality and profound truth of this identification.

Secondly, there is a constant negotiation between the viewer with the subject. At these moments when the divide between past and present is breached, one feels self-consciously voyeuristic for looking, as much as the subjects communicate an equivalent self-consciousness for having been recorded or observed. In the case of these blindfolded prisoners, that self-consciousness remains solely ours.

In retrospect, I can see my attachment to these images at the periphery of history as part of a larger act of recuperation. I projected them onto moments in my own family history for which I had no images, an enterprise I unconsciously repeated in different ways in a number of films over several years. Coming of age at a time when the home movie and the personal archival was at the center of so many critical conversations, I became acutely aware of the lack of images and clear narratives in my own family past. My film work made attempts to address that lack, by emphatically noting that void, or by replacing the void with images that might evoke those that were never made.

Also, as a child, whenever I saw archival images in documentaries on the screen or on television of Second World War or of the concentration camps, I was invariably drawn to the figures and details at the periphery of the frame or behind the main action. Before video, you had to develop strategies to glean as much as possible from an image, never knowing if you would ever be able to see it again. This was hardly an analytical procedure. It was an attempt to see as much as one possibly could in a fleeting image, in the vain hope of perhaps seeing someone who I might know, or of finding a detail that could perhaps tell me something of my family's life during or before the war. The archive became the site of my psychological desire to see the past, and held the illusory hope of some satisfaction or closure. In that construct, the archive allows for the opportunity to complete the picture, even if the images are those of another narrative and other histories. It's the site where the unconscious finds expression—through literary and photographic means.

The archive makes it plain that narrative and historical meaning are materially and linguistically bound; that these material representations create forms experienced in time. That we have the ability to project secondary meanings and reverberant histories on these images is evidence that the archive is the site of historical construction itself.

Let me return to the image of the blindfolded prisoner for a moment, to indulge a voyeuristic luxury, a profane fantasy.... Could he be thinking of his family, his fate, the warmth of the dappled sunlight on his eyelids? What could possibly be going on in the mind of someone who can't see or know that he's on the precipice of history? That knowledge remains ours alone—knowing what will come in just a few short days after these images were shot.

This moment “just before” is mirrored in the film, *Persistence*, by two moments “just after,” the two superimposed moments of the ‘year zero’ just after World War II, and the ‘year zero’ after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Just as physicists study the traces of subatomic particles accelerated in ever-increasing velocities to get infinitesimally closer to an understanding of the creation of the universe, I’m similarly attracted to these images, these traces, as my own universe was created in such a moment of catastrophe.

II.

The recent past always presents itself as if destroyed by catastrophes.

Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*

For over a half-century, the word post-war reverberated with specific meaning, with the absolutes of the Holocaust, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki as part of that meaning. But beyond the specifics of time and place, there’s another Postwar... the one that inhabits us. That state of mind was formed in the period just after catastrophe, and its most salient feature was the distinct possibility of yet another, more complete annihilation. Next time all humanity would be its victim. This immanence had a specific valence, attached to vast hierarchical systems of military, economic, and political power. And that real threat of accidental or intentional disaster was either internalized, or expressed through art and politics. With the twin thresholds of the fall of the Berlin Wall and 9/11, we’ve no doubt passed into yet another paradigm. But its worth noting some essential aspects of the state of mind that produced the cultural response of that time, which addressed the universalist claims of the modernist fantasy that came before.

Jean-Francois Lyotard is instructive here, as he convincingly asserts in *The Postmodern Condition* that the unifying “grand narratives” of progress, reward, and redemption can’t possibly hold. If the period preceding ours operated under such narrative assumptions (fascist and Stalinist ideologies being their most extreme and narrow forms), then the twentieth century catastrophes of the Holocaust, the Gulag, and the bomb are the primary evidence of their fallacy.

With our naïve arrival into a world that’s already fragmented and in ruin, it takes quite some time to realize that this fragmentation is to us a normative condition. Having never assumed the world to operate under these specious narratives in any case, we also have learned that the catastrophe is neither fully understandable nor describable, and that every effort to describe it, in some way extends our distance from it even further.

Our finely-tuned skepticism to the possibility of comprehension, conditioned by both the incomprehensibility of events and the inadequacies of documentation and testimony, extends to a skepticism of language itself—what it can and can’t convey—since every unknown that precedes us can only be known to us through the imperfect and contingent exchange of words and images.

Since our sense of narrative has been constructed from the fragmented shards of multiple narratives, there’s a natural affinity to open forms, difficult structures,

multiple interpretations, divergences, and diversity. This esthetic formulation seeks to express an understanding of a cultural condition that’s larger than one’s own state of mind. It’s not purely an expression, but also an analysis, and by extension, a critique.

These tendencies are not bred of theory, but of experience. But all this too, has changed....

III.

All this talk of getting back to normal,” he said of the September terrorist attacks. “What’s normal is now. What was not normal was before. This is the reality of our world. It’s the same experience all over, but here in Europe the experience of being vulnerable has existed for hundreds of years. People have somehow become used to living with it.

Christoph von Dohnanyi (Nephew of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, former music director of the Cleveland Orchestra)

The economic precarity that many Europeans accept as the new normal, has since the economic collapse of 2008, become an even more common global condition. That precarity, borne of part-time labor and an increasing economic insecurity, has expanded to include a precarious sense of physical security, political agency, and social stability as well. The insecurity that comes from living under such constraints produces a future that’s foreshortened, with the fear that some unknown event, perhaps even the next catastrophe, may be just around the corner.

Every train station, every airport, every bridge, every hotel, auditorium and concert hall, every passage and thoroughfare, every site of entrance and egress, each has the potential for disaster or normalcy, each becomes the site of our new consciousness, reducing every moment and every site to a present that must be contended with, either in acceptance or resistance.

In this environment, and with a new and seemingly endless kind of war being waged simultaneously, one asks: Has the Postwar ended?

War, it seems, happens to others elsewhere. Those who fight it in our name are professionalized from their very first day, and when they are injured or die, it is only their families that pay the price. As George Bush said without irony... our job is to go shopping. Most often, war is neither declared nor defined, it is conceived as outside national borders, and the enemies are non-state actors. In this surreal matrix, war becomes an ever-increasingly abstract, mediated concept.

Unlike the images from Vietnam, which demanded direct response as thousands of the drafted came home wounded or dead, the few images of the current wars that we are able to see now are even further at the edges, and more extreme—whether it’s the image coming from a predator drone, or from a cell phone on the streets of Tehran. And we are equally powerless to either protest the employment of these high-tech weapons, managed by out-sourced non-governmental employees in their suburban Virginia bunkers, targeting sites in countries we are not at war with; or to

assist the citizens of Tehran who challenge the impossible conditions of dictatorship by daring to face armed agents on their streets. This insulation of events, either intentionally or unintentionally, from the possibility of direct response is a signal characteristic of our time.

What these contemporary images coming to us through both authorized and unauthorized sources demand, as they always have, is a political and emotional analysis that's able to counter the reflexive alienation that now comes packaged with them. The present is now sufficiently encoded that it requires of us the powers of analysis, discipline, and attention formerly reserved for archival images. By actively looking at their edges, these images will eventually tell us what we need to know. The images have it all in them... it's ours to find out.

When producing images of our own, for some future archive, those following us must always be kept in mind, since they'll be required to rethink their past (our present) in as nuanced a way as possible, if only to understand their own *presentness* in its fullness. The images we produce now, will have more meaning than we are able to imagine.

Perhaps the acceptance of the "long war" as a condition of daily life means we now need to rethink "Postwar" as a utopian concept... again, for a time just after.

... Will we be able to recognize it when it comes?

Comment vivre sans inconnu devant soi? (How can we live without the unknown before us?)

Rene Char, *Argument*

