Swollen Skin, Non-Demarcated Slit Throats and Doll-Like Faces
The Problem of Indigestibility

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Yesterday the distant past, tomorrow a tunnel of darkness

- Dexter Filkins
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Introduction

“Like the war to nourish you? Have to feed it something too.”

‘Alternative facts’ have – paradoxically – become a very real part of our current world. This Orwellian wording refers to the phenomenon of twisting the truth to improve or underest one’s position. The recent discussion regarding American president Donald J. Trump’s inauguration proves to be an excellent example. White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer announced that the 2017 inauguration was unparalleled in terms of the number of attending, supporting people. However, aerial photographs circulated, which proved that Spicer’s statement simply was not true. Making apparent that the role of photojournalism is still one of grave importance. In order to evade an ‘alternative reality’, we will need a form of journalism that is able to handle alternative facts; making it possible for people to situate themselves as subjects that are capable of critical thinking.

However, one might forget that ‘the truth’, which I have aforementioned in the second sentence of this introduction, has – and always will be – a problematic and slippery concept. Consequently, making the reporting of the truth quite the hassle. Photography is often seen as a medium proficient in offering an objective representation of a situation. Even though, nowadays, this objectivity is regularly questioned, by for example mentioning choice of subject/object, cropping and interference regarding the aspects of mise-en-scène, it is still seen as a meaningful and important news medium. A news field which heavily relies on photojournalism, is the coverage of war.

The technical developments concerning war photography have proven incisively. Changes have even completely changed the way news is being represented, distributed and consumed. The introduction of digital war reporting is an example of one of the significant developments. Digitalisation of photojournalism implied that the distribution of news became much faster and easier. Not only professional news photographers, but also bystanders could cover the situation by simply uploading their photos or videos to

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the indefinite realm of the internet. Also, the materials became smaller and lighter, and therefore easier to carry. 5 Both developments allowed the photographers to document places and situations that initially were not accessible to the general public.

As a result, our current information and internet culture bombards us with images. These images are often of traumatic nature. One can wonder if we – because of the expanded possibilities regarding war photography – have not seen it all. However, this is not the case. There are images and photographs that do not circulate, because of censorship and/or their overwhelming traumatic impact. The reinstatement of censorship is one, far less positive, consequence of the digitalisation of war reporting.6 Important political actors tried to take control over the photographic output; leading to an increase of censorship, legal restrictions and surveillance. Especially after 9/11, the military tried to convince journalists to ‘embed’ with troops. Embedment meant a chance for the photojournalists to cover the front line, but it also meant that they had to live by the military codes-of-conduct; limiting their autonomy.

Subsequently, because of political regulations, a lot of photographs have not found their way to the general public, but as it turns out, this is also because of their ability to represent certain traumas. Researcher Frank van Vree has used the notion of ‘indigestible images’ to describe and define these kinds of images.7 The images make people feel physically unwell and defy comprehension; images that are literally and figuratively indigestible. In other words, they transcend mind and body.

Michael Kamber is a photojournalist who, in 2013, published his book: Photojournalists of War: The Untold Stories of Iraq. His book is a collection of previously unpublished photographs of America’s and England’s conflict with Iraq, and Iraq’s conflict with Iraq.8 The nine-year-lasting war has been covered by numerous news organizations, like the Los Angeles Times and the New York Times. However, a lot of sides to the story have not (yet) seen the light. Kamber’s book offers the possibility to expand the story of the war, by the exposure of these indigestible images. A selection has been made, and there are three photographs – made by Christoph Bangert, Eros Hoagland and Stephanie Sinclair – which feature faces of victims in three different ways. All three of

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8 There were more Western countries involved, however the U.S. and the U.K. were the absolute front runners.
the photographs have not circulated, because of their indigestible nature. By means of an image analysis, these three photojournalistic photographs will be discussed and analysed in this research. Especially, in regard to their emphasis on the human body and their fleshly materiality. To do so, the notion of indigestible images will be further explained. Also, for these images seem to avoid narrativization, a method is needed that addresses narrative elements, but also moves beyond them. Therefore, Roland Barthes’ notions of the ‘studium’ and the ‘punctum’ will be introduced, for his train of thought combines narrative and photographic details.\(^9\) Julia Kristeva’s concept of ‘the abject’ will be used as well, for the three photographs all feature bodies, but they are not regular bodies. They are liminal bodies which transgress boundaries we take for granted and, therefore, can be regarded as abject bodies.\(^9\) Barthes’ and Kristeva’s concepts will help us understand what it is that makes these photographs indigestible.

This focus on the exteriority of the human body also comes back in the theoretical framework, provided by Emmanuel Levinas. For the indigestible images transcend mind and body, instead of a solely rational and theoretical framework, a more empirically oriented approach is necessary. This approach is offered by the field of phenomenology. The term ‘phenomenology’ as an overarching research field, is a problematic term, for researchers often take it in various directions.\(^1\) However, one could say that phenomenology concerns itself with the act of consciousness and the phenomena or objects this consciousness is directed towards.\(^1\) The perceptions and the experiences of phenomena, manifesting from an embodied perspective, are the cruxes of phenomenology. Levinas, however, also deviated quite a bit from the traditional founder of phenomenology Edmund Husserl and his infamous student Martin Heidegger. Levinas saw a proper phenomenological awareness of the body as an opportunity to overcome Cartesian dualism. This awareness was based on his main focusses: alterity and ethics.\(^1\) Because of his/her body, a person cannot be replaced by someone else, and therefore is irreducible. The Other can never be completely grasped by the other and poses therefore


as an unreachable infinity. Levinas’ theories all come together in his notion of ‘the face of the Other’. The face is the only (exterior) handhold which provides some insight in the Other’s infinity. The fact that these indigestible photographs have the ability to evoke something within the viewer, implies that there needs to be looked beyond the viewer’s being and knowledge. Because of his emphasis on alterity, exteriority and particularly ethics, Levinas’ theory proves particularly useful. Levinas’ thinking might provide the guidance to help us understand why these images make us feel uncomfortable and why they seem to make an ethical demand. Therefore, this thesis will implement Levinas’ phenomenological framework to research the photographs that otherwise would remain hidden.

In order to find out why these indigestible images do not provide a narrative for the viewer to be absorbed by, but instead offer shock – inducing a mental and physical feeling of incomprehensibility and sickening –, this thesis will investigate the problem of indigestibility, through the unpublished photos of the Iraq War, made by Christoph Bangert, Eros Hoagland and Stephanie Sinclair. To provide an answer, the research will be divided into three parts. The first chapter will concern itself with the historical background information concerning the Iraq War. The coverage of the Iraq War will be discussed as well. Then, in the second chapter, image analyses will be carried out on the three chosen images, by way of Roland Barthes’ notions of the studium and the punctum. This chapter also focusses on the notions of indigestible images, the rupture of time and abject bodies. Philosopher Emmanuel Levinas’ ethical theory will be mentioned briefly as well. And lastly, in the third chapter, the findings of the analyses will be interpreted through a more in-depth ethical lens by way of the theoretical framework provided by Levinas. His influences will be mentioned, but most importantly, his theory regarding phenomenology and the face of the Other will provide the needed guidance to understand why the indigestible images evoke such rupturing feelings.

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Chapter 1: Sow the Iraqi Wind and Reap Its Whirlwind

“Down, down, down. Would the fall never come to an end?”

The events on the 11th of September 2001 literally and figuratively destabilised and destroyed the foundations of Western society. As a result, the terror attacks enhanced discussions about the threat of terrorism. The, at the time, American president George Bush, and several others, started to take matters into their own hands. Strikingly, the unprecedented terror attack on American soil was claimed to be a direct and indirect reason for the invasion of Iraq on the 20th of March 2003. The Iraq War can be divided into three phases: the mentioned Invasion, the Post-invasion phase and the Aftermath. It has to be noted that this distinction is drawn mainly from a Western perspective, for it underscores the presence of the American military. And even though there is not enough room to explore the many complex aspects of this convoluted war, this thesis will provide a general outline of the war in order to create a sense of oversight. Every war is fought for different reasons and causes, and they influence the total ‘feel’ of the war. The Iraq War was no exception and created a certain atmosphere. Therefore, the ‘three phases’ of the war will be discussed, followed by a consideration of the media coverage regarding this particular war. This chapter will, thus, provide information that will help us to understand why the three chosen photographs stood (and stand) out, during a heavily covered and mediated war.

1.1 An Infinite Nosedive

A possible connection between al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein, and the threat of weapons of mass destruction led to the invasion of Iraq in 2003. U.S. and British troops invaded Iraq without the approval of the UN, immediately making ‘Operation Iraqi Freedom’ quite controversial. The operation was built around eight objectives: ending the regime of Saddam Hussein, find and destroy Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction, search and capture Iraqi terrorists, collect intelligence about terrorist networks, put this

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19 There is of course also a pre-invasion phase. This phase will very briefly be touched upon by mentioning the reasons for the invasion.
intelligence in a broader context and relate it to the global network of weapons of mass
destruction, deliver humanitarian support to Iraqi civilians, secure Iraq’s oil fields and
natural resources, and offer help and guidance to the Iraqi people to enable them to
transition into a self-governing nation.\textsuperscript{21} These objectives raise questions about whose
interests were at stake. However, the invasion was relatively quick and on the 13th of
April 2003 Hussein was captured, toppling his twenty-four-year reign.\textsuperscript{22}

The following eleven years proved to be an actual tug of war; power struggles
manifested not only between the remaining Hussein supporters and the U.S. and British
troops, but also between national and international insurgents. Unfortunately, the ones
that proved to be the most affected by the constant and surrounding tugs, were the Iraqi
civilians.\textsuperscript{23} Initially, loyalists associated with the Ba’ath Party – Saddam Hussein’s party –
proved to be the biggest threat to a national, and international, consensus. However, the
invasion of foreign forces angered religious radicals as well, leading to a string of
guerrilla attacks.\textsuperscript{24} These were accompanied by terrorist activity set up by members of
al-Qaeda, and pressure of surrounding Middle Eastern countries. Especially problematic
was the fact that by then nobody knew when and whom they were fighting.\textsuperscript{25} This effect
was even intensified by the development of insurgents dressing and acting as Iraqi
civilians, leading to very controversial and catastrophic situations.

These situations spiralled out of control, turning the whole Iraqi ‘situation’ into a
very cluttered whirlwind of destruction and violence. After realizing this, president Bush
agreed to decrease the number of deployed U.S. troops. Eventually, after a long progress
that outlived Bush’ presidency, the last active U.S. troops withdrew on the 18\textsuperscript{th} of
December 2011.\textsuperscript{26} Unfortunately, the withdrawal did not lead to a decrease in violence.
Primarily radical Sunni – members from a recognized autonomous branch from the
Islam – resurfaced while carrying out terror campaigns.\textsuperscript{27} Therefore, instead of also
directing their anger towards the U.S. or Britain, Iraqis started to primarily point their
weapons at each other during civil war-like attacks. The insurgency strengthened in the

\textsuperscript{23} Herbert, T.W. (2009), p87.
\textsuperscript{24} El-Shibiny, M. (2010), p100.
\textsuperscript{26} Dodge, T. (2013) ‘State and society in Iraq ten years after regime change: the rise of a new
\textsuperscript{27} Mansoor, P.R. (2013), p40.
mid-2014s, because of takeovers of cities by not only al-Qaeda, but also by the Islamic State (ISIS).\(^{28}\) This lead to the decision of President Barack Obama to bring back its troops to Iraq. In order to keep a safe distance, the U.S. involvement was only aerial. Regrettably and despite all the efforts, Iraq – to this day – remains to be caught up in a seemingly infinite nosedive.

### 1.2 A Game of Chinese Whispers

From the very beginning until the end, the Iraq war came in for extensive criticism. The justification of the invasion was a very big part of the initial criticism, surrounding the actual battlefield.\(^ {29}\) The reasons for the United Kingdom and the United States – often adduced as the ‘selling points’ to legitimize the war – were the threats posed by Hussein and other forms of terrorism, and the alleged weapons of mass destruction. The absence of weapons of mass destruction forced president Bush to redirect America’s motivation; instead of fighting immediate threats of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction, the U.S. troops were there to create a democratic and civilised space for the Iraqi people.\(^ {30}\) This ‘detour’ has led to the belief that the Western presence was primarily there to remove Hussein from his powerful position via an un-sanctioned manner, and for Iraq’s oil supply.\(^ {31}\)

Strikingly, however, after the Vietnam War, the criticism against the war was relatively mild. This has to do with the significant role of the media and the way of digital war reporting.\(^ {32}\) The cameras became smaller and lighter, and therefore easier to carry.\(^ {33}\) Making covering the war from up close a lot easier. Also, because of developments regarding technology and the digitalization of photography, it became possible to cover every second of the war. Instead of having to develop the photographs, the photos could be sent and seen without this technical delay. Moreover, the photos could be transferred from anywhere, at any time. Making it possible to cover the war at all times had as a result that the media coverage blew up. The extensibility of the media eventually showed how they did not only cover the war, they also (re)constructed it.\(^ {34}\)

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A crucial aspect was the embeddedness of the journalists. To be ‘embedded’ meant that a journalist was able to become part of the avant-garde and to position him-or herself at the physical battlefield. He/she would become part of a military squad and therefore become part of the action. However, it is important to note that the embedded journalists were not individual contractors, but they were inevitably linked to a news organization, like the BBC or the New York Times. As a result of their embeddedness, journalists were able to witness and send immediate footage of the situations. They had more access to locations and information that used to be completely classified. However, being embedded also had another decisive influence on journalism and even the general portrayal of news and ‘the truth’. The embedding system was not new, it was even used during World War II and the Vietnam War, however, during these wars, the system was still in its infancy. At the moment of the Iraq War, the embedding system was completely thought through; making it a very powerful political tool. The illusion was created that there was immediate access to the action, but – in fact – the footage was directly and indirectly, painstakingly filtered. For example, journalists had to sign a contract which stated the (vague) term that they would not disclose any information that would endanger the military mission.

This kind of filtering and control became visible in several forms. The most obvious result was the lack of criticism portrayed in the news. Research showed that the pre-invasion U.S. news showed Iraq War-reports from which less than six percent was sceptical about the reason to start the war. Moreover, their entire portfolio of the war coverage at that time only contained one percent that portrayed anti-war sentiments. Also, because of the embeddedness of the journalists, most reports exuded a military discourse. The co-operation of the soldiers and the journalists resulted in a closeness, which often made it impossible for journalists to contain a fairly objective position towards the military and their decisions. This development led to another very visual aspect surrounding the Iraq War, namely the sanitization of warfare. Controlling the output but still maintaining the idea of immediacy made it possible to frame the news in such a way that national heroes and national pride could be manufactured by

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the media. The access to 24-hour ‘real-time’ warfare made war a spectacle.\textsuperscript{41} A problematic aspect was the fact that the war on the screen started to look like a videogame; foregrounding the action and spectacle, instead of the tragic loss of life. Think for example of photojournalist Kuni Takahashi’s photo of American soldiers on an Iraqi bridge, which was featured on \textit{NBC News} and in the \textit{Boston Herald}.\textsuperscript{42} Or the numerous photos, showing the take down and fall of Hussein’s statue that was located in Bagdad.\textsuperscript{43} As a result, the media started to mainly show a clean war that was without chaos, bodies and blood.\textsuperscript{44} Consequently, the ‘sensationalization’ of the war made it easier (and more ‘fun’) to watch the Iraq War. Furthermore, this cleaning job had another very grave implication. Scholar James Der Darian has formulated the concept named ‘virtuous war’.\textsuperscript{45} The one-sided representation demonstrated the belief in war as a way to solve ethical problems (virtue side), while at the same time showing how wars can be fought from a remote distance (virtual side). This oxymoronic development proved to be a way of legitimizing the Western presence in Iraq. By fighting from a safe distance, the number of Western casualties could be quite reduced, and therefore giving the impression that military violence is the right way to solve pressing political issues. According to Der Darian:

\begin{quote}
Virtuous war, in other words, exploits digital technologies to project an ethos of killing in sharp contrast with previous forms of warfare. Fact blurs with fiction as virtuality collapses reality into computer simulations, thereby obscuring who is responsible – and thus to be held accountable – for killing others. [...] ‘One experiences “death” but not the tragic consequences of it’, Der Darian writes. ‘In virtuous war we now face not just the confusion but the pixilation of war and game on the same screen.’
\end{quote}

Military ascendancy becomes a legitimised reason to, let’s say, invade a country to absorb terror threats and find weapons of mass destruction, or to construct a democratic system there. It all depends on the narrative that is chosen to be told, revealing that there are always more sides to every story. This chapter tried to emphasize this by way of contrasting the chaotic war and its neat representation. The war itself was very tumultuous because of contradictory goals and the many involved

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{41} Matheson, D.; Allan, S. (2009), p11.
\item \textsuperscript{42} See Image 1.
\item \textsuperscript{43} For an example, see image 2.
\item \textsuperscript{44} Tumbler, H.; Palmer, J. (2004), p57, p72.
\item \textsuperscript{46} Matheson, D.; Allan, S. (2009), p15.
\end{itemize}
groups and troops. However, the media often only showed the action-packed photos, intentionally neglecting the many lives that were taken. Therefore, the next chapter will shed light on the photographs that were not published, because of their unclean content and look.
Chapter 2: Not Your Ordinary Ghost Story

"you have sadness living in places sadness shouldn’t live”\(^{47}\)

The previous chapter tried to contrast the extremely messy war with its hygienic representation. This chapter will continue to try to lay bare the artificiality of a virtuous war, for – even though the media mostly showed the sanitized version of the Iraq War – there are photographs that do not follow this clean narrative. These photographs do show the good, the bad and the ugly. Many of them demonstrate the catastrophic consequences that the war has on human bodies from up close, instead of focusing on the action from a safe distance. Consequently, a lot of these examples have not been published and do not circulate. They would either reveal sensitive or incriminating information, or their content would get lost and be burdened by the excess of explicit graphic content.\(^{48}\) Therefore, their social value can be questioned; for they do not serve a fitting purpose, what are they good for? Dutch researcher Frank van Vree has formulated the notion of ‘indigestible images’ to analyse this kind of photographs.\(^{49}\) He uses this corporeal metaphor, for due to their graphic nature they do not only display nauseating situations, they turn the act of looking into a sickening action; the content and the act both become indigestible, for they cannot be incorporated. Especially the deviation of the grand narrative of the war has led to the photographs and the photographed to become incomprehensible. Van Vree ascribes this effect to the very fact that these images ‘appear to resist narrativization’.\(^{50}\)

Photojournalist Michael Kamber experienced the dynamics of war and photojournalism at first hand and to commemorate the photojournalists that did not make it out alive, he interviewed photojournalists that have stories and pictures that also have not made it back to the general public.\(^{51}\) The interviewed photojournalists all have different backgrounds and opinions, but they share the aspect of experiencing some form of censorship. The collection of photographs and stories make up for a 275-page-long book; making browsing through the book already an impactful experience.

\(^{49}\) Van Vree, F. (2010), p279.
\(^{50}\) Van Vree, F. (2010), p278.
These images, without the text and context, evoke a direct response and relationship between the photograph and the observer. By means of the book, Kamber gives the opportunity to indigestible images to show their importance. In order to analyse these indigestible images, a methodological framework is needed that does not only pay attention to the narrative elements of photographs, but also discusses exactly what it is that makes these photos stand out from the rest. Therefore, in this chapter, image analyses of the chosen images will be carried out, using Roland Barthes’ notions of the ‘studium’ and the ‘punctum’.

2.1 Hope Turned into an Empty Drip

The three selected photographs all show a different side and story of the Iraq War, but – at the same time – they do have something in common, for they seem to evoke a comparable effect. They all display very different stories, people and intentions. However, in a book full of striking images, they somehow seem to demand time and attention. Often the subjects of photographs are emphasized, instead of the medium that conveys and portrays the subject/object. However, the indigestible images have the ability to make the photographic nature of the photographs noticeable. This combination of narrative and photographic details is what theorist Roland Barthes described as ‘the studium’ and ‘the punctum’.

Barthes describes the studium as a form of meaning making that functions through understandable and familiar information. The studium is what interests the viewer of a photograph. It is, however, important to note that this interest is based on the viewer's cultural background. By means of education and practice, one is able to understand the photo’s subject and narrative. Creating a situation where the act of understanding and learning incites pleasure, instead of the photograph itself. The punctum, however, does not manifest from the viewer’s perspective, but is an effect that forces itself onto the viewer. The punctum is able to ‘disturb the studium’. In lieu of providing comprehensible information, the punctum pierces the spectator by means of details in the photo that deviate from the provided information. By puncturing the viewer, the normalised narrative of the photo is also destabilised. Therefore, the punctum not only pricks, but leaves a lingering bruise as well; it ruptures. Because of the

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importance of the combination of the narrative elements and the photographic details, the images will all firstly be analysed from a studium-inspired perspective, and they then their punctum-aspects will be discussed.

The first photograph has been made by Christoph Bangert in 2005 and it displays an older man who has severe burns all over his body.\(^{56}\) He is sitting in a small hospital room, on a bed with a pink sheet, wearing no clothes and he is explicitly in a lot of pain. Also, he is hooked up to a drip. Even though the fact that he is in a hospital, the scene radiates a sense of abandonment. And – according to Bangert – this is true.\(^{57}\) There is no staff or equipment left at the hospital, for they all had to relocate. From a studium-like perspective, the viewer of the photo learns that the man’s attachment to the drip becomes a very cruel and ironic token of hope in a place where there is no more hope left. However, the photograph also induces contrasting feelings, for it shows a hopeless situation while – at the same time – it exudes a feeling of strength. The man is photographed from an upwards angle and he is looking straight into the camera; a form of unexpected frontality that can be seen as a sign of the man’s cooperation.\(^{58}\) In this way, the camera angle gives the photograph a certain weight. Strikingly, a lot of Bangert’s photographs are not published in the newspaper he is embedded with, the *New York Times*. However, the photo appears to create an atmosphere of importance; with all its enormity, it is a story that needs to be told.

Photographer Eros Hoagland tried to see and capture “this [the Iraq War] defining moment in our generation’s history” as well.\(^{59}\) As a result, he has taken pictures that foreground the gruesomeness of the war. Just like Bangert’s photographs, several of Hoagland’s photos were not published because of censorship. According to Hoagland it should not matter if we step on people’s toes, but the people deserve to truly witness the war.\(^{60}\) One of his visually explicit photographs was taken in Bagdad in February 2008, and features the head of a female suicide bomber.\(^{61}\) Besides the human body part, we see dead doves, litter and the legs of soldiers. The photograph is in black and white and has been made from close range. Furthermore, the subject is portrayed from a downwards facing angle. As a result, the woman is literally looked down upon. This

\(^{56}\) See Image 3.
\(^{61}\) See Image 4.
effect is reinforced by the surrounding waste and the uninvolved soldiers; turning the woman into garbage and even human waste. Another striking aspect of the photo, is the unexpected contrast of the head of an extremist and the dead doves. The symbolism of ‘peace’ – enforced by the doves – is quickly destroyed by the violence and malice – brought forward by the horrendous implications of the act of a suicide bombing. Again, these connotations become obtainable because of cultural education (studium), for the knowing and recollecting of other photographs and images is crucial for these connotations to be made.

The same need for a proficient, cultural background applies to Stephanie Sinclair’s photograph. On the 27th of April 2003, she photographed a six-year-old, Iraqi girl. Sinclair, instead of showing the western society’s involvement, focused on Iraqi civilians during the war period. The Iraqi girl was playing outside with four siblings when a cluster bomb hit, killing her and one of her siblings.62 The photograph displays the upper half of the girl’s body and the hands and a foot of a mosque employee, preparing the girl’s body for the funeral. 63 The body is being prepared with some kind of clear liquid, resembling water. Her face has been cleaned, but her chest is still covered in blood spatters. The proximity and the eye height-perspective create a closeness, making the spectator feel very small and vulnerable as well. Furthermore, the relationship between the certain employee and the girl is unknown. It is also uncertain what the rest of her body looks like. The unknown and the tension are what draw the viewer in. The narrative of the image is not closed off, thus, the viewer becomes personally involved with the picture because of the will to understand.

2.2 Overflowing Bodies

In the previous paragraphs, Bangert’s, Hoagland’s and Sinclair’s photographs have been analysed from a studium-like perspective. However, they all possess aspects that evoke a rupturing effect. Even taking a second look in today’s visual culture-society can implicate a puncturing detail. And that is exactly what happened while browsing through Kamber’s assemblage. In Bangert’s photograph, the man’s hand does not seem to be in proportion. Moreover, the hand displays several colour differences. But the part that strikes me most, is the swolleness of the hand. Even though, the man’s whole body

63 See Image 5.
has undergone extreme torture and this is clearly visible, the hand almost looks fake. It becomes almost impossible to tell which pieces of skin are untouched by fire and which are not (if there are even pieces that have been left undamaged). The same goes for Hoagland’s photograph; in the image, the slit of the woman’s neck overflows in the surrounding. Consequently, one cannot know exactly where the human body starts and where it ends. In the beginning, the viewer could even be unsure of what he or she is even looking at. In Sinclair’s photograph, a strong contrast is visible between the damaged body and the wet face. Because of the liquid, the skin of the girl’s face looks like it consists of wax; turning her appearance into an almost doll-like one. Again, the lines between natural and artificial, real and fake, human and unhuman become blurred.

The similarities between the three photographs seem to rely on a focus on the body. More specifically, all three images show a form of alienation of the human body. Swollen skin, non-demarcated slit throats and doll-like faces; they are what make viewers feel queasy. The reason for this is that they are not ‘normal’ bodies, they are abject bodies; they transgress boundaries we take for granted. These bodies float between being subject and object, clean and unclean, value and waste, and living and dead. The bodies are reduced into flesh. By being positioned as these liminal objects/subjects, they are taken out of context and their problems are with being misplaced. As a result, the meanings of the objects collapse. In general, therefore, abject objects are normally kept out of sight to preserve some kind of ‘human identity’. They are pushed away, for once they materialize, we are painfully reminded that they are inherent parts of us. This aspect of abject bodies is where the theory of Emmanuel Levinas’ proves of significant value. Abject bodies are kept out of sight for they do not fit the neat narrative of ‘humanity’. Ironically, Levinas points out that the in- and outside of our bodies is exactly what makes us human. Our bodily needs are what connect us, but also make us inherently different, for we recognize familiar needs, but we do not have the same corporeal needs at the exact same time. Perhaps, the reason for why abject bodies are normally kept hidden, is because exactly their humanity is foregrounded in an intrusive way. As a result, the person whom encounters an abject body is forced to emphasize with it, and is confronted with a feeling of powerlessness. This ethical

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consequence, brought forward by the encounter of another person/body, will be further explored in the next chapter.

However, it has become clear that the abject representation of the human body can cause an extreme and direct puncturing effect, but one can wonder, what is it exactly that is being ruptured? The fact that an image is able to pierce its viewer implies that a dialectical relationship is being created that requires time. Photography is able to ‘stop time’ and allows for details that otherwise would have remained unseen, and therefore impossible to be analysed.\(^\text{67}\) Therefore, photographs rupture time when they are made and when they are looked at. Strikingly though, an image does not provide actual accessibility to the moment when it was made. ‘Seeing a moment’ implies that the linear flow of time is unsettled, for the viewer is being made aware of time. The present therefore – according to Jacques Derrida – ‘is never constituted by being ‘in’ the moment but rather by being undone by the moment, being outside of itself’.\(^\text{68}\) Furthermore, the present always carries what has already been and what is yet to come. However, how can time be visibly noticeable? Particia M. Keller conceptualizes the notion of ‘ghosts’: traces of history that bring back the past through appearance or affect, and these haunting details float between the spectral and visible realms.\(^\text{69}\) These ghosts however do not only hint at the past, they also demonstrate that the past is not something that has died; the past is something that infiltrates, lives and haunts in the present and in the future. These traces – which could be interpreted as the punctum – open and wound time. All in all, it can therefore be said that the three chosen photographs disturb their narratives – and time in general –, for they feature deviant photographic details which, in their turn, emphasize bodies and body parts that also cannot be contained.


Chapter 3: A ‘Friendly’ Slap in the Face?

“The world was to me a secret which I desired to divine.”

“So it goes”.

In his book *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (1974), Emmanuel Levinas makes an intriguing statement regarding art in general:

> Art is the pre-eminent exhibition in which the said is reduced to a pure theme, to absolute exposition, even to shamelessness capable of holding all looks for which it is exclusively destined. The said is reduced to the Beautiful, which supports Western ontology.

This quote shows the complexity and controversial approach Levinas is often remembered for. His notion of ‘the said’ refers to language as having the ability to hermetically seal one’s identity/being. Levinas deferred from traditional thought, and distinguished something that in his opinion transcended even epistemology and ontology, namely alterity. The above quote shows Levinas’ strong criticism regarding ontology and he even linked this to the arts. Following this quite radical thought, one could question why Levinas’ theory and thoughts could help us understand why indigestible images evoke such uncomfortable feelings. Fortunately, Levinas’ train of thought is far more complex – he even refers to Shakespeare in his texts numerous times – and he acknowledges that artworks and images that result in critical thinking can actually teach us something extremely valuable. Therefore, this section of the thesis will firstly discuss Levinas’ influences and their implications, for they have led to his sometimes-controversial position within the field of phenomenology. Then, Levinas’ theoretical framework will be used to interpret the three analysed photographs from a social and ethical perspective.

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74 In contrast to ‘the saying’, which refers to the idea of being irreducibly exposed to another. Levinas, E.; (Transl.) Cohen, R.A. (1979) *Time and the other*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press. P23.
76 Hand, S. (2009), p68.
3.1 Never are There Two People in One Person’s Shoes

The term ‘phenomenology’ as an overarching research field, is a problematic term, for researchers have taken and still take the term in very diverse directions. However, one could say that phenomenology concerns itself with the act of consciousness and the phenomena or objects this consciousness is directed towards; phenomenology foregrounds experiences and experiencing above anything else.\textsuperscript{77} The Lithuanian-born French philosopher (1906-1995), did not initially have a big impact on the realm of phenomenology. He mainly introduced phenomenology in France by means of translating works by Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger.\textsuperscript{78} Luckily, his own works have been dusted and now he is even considered as one of the most influential twentieth-century thinkers.\textsuperscript{79} Levinas did not only translate the two important philosophers, Husserl and Heidegger were his teachers and sources of inspiration. However, during his lifetime, Levinas took his own route and deviated from the phenomenological theories by Husserl and Heidegger. It is important to note that Heidegger’s involvement with the Nazi-party proved an important reason for Levinas to re-evaluate existing fundamental phenomenological theories.\textsuperscript{80}

While aligning himself with phenomenological thinking, Levinas opted for a theory based on alterity. By doing so, he drifted away from the egocentric theories, which primarily focus on a subject’s own consciousness. Instead, he emphasizes how every subject is different and therefore cannot be reduced as part of a totalitarian system.\textsuperscript{81} Levinas felt that there had not been opportunities to explore ‘the Other’ in Western philosophy.\textsuperscript{82} Therefore, in his first main philosophical text \textit{Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority} (1961), the Other proved the main subject of his work. In order to move away from the notion that a subject could be controlled by reducing it to an object, Levinas described the Other as a phenomenon that can never be fully grasped or comprehended by the self; it is irreducibly individual. That is why Levinas also tries to retain from reducing the Other by using different ways to address the Other, like ‘the

\textsuperscript{78} Hand, S. (2009), p1.
\textsuperscript{79} Hand, S. (2009), p2,
\textsuperscript{81} Levinas, E.; (Transl.) Lingis, A. (1961), P12 (from the introduction, written by John wild).
\textsuperscript{82} Levinas, E.; (Transl.) Lingis, A. (1961), p11.
other’, ‘the metaphysical other’, ‘the absolute other’, and the list goes on.\textsuperscript{83}\textsuperscript{84} The Other, therefore, can be seen as transcendental infinitive.\textsuperscript{85} Because of Levinas’ move away from traditional main topics like ontology and epistemology, it becomes clear that he thinks that there is something that even transcends these massive, loaded themes. For Levinas, this turns out to alterity and – as a result of alterity – ethics.

As has been mentioned in the previous chapter in relation to the abject bodies – which are visible in the three photographs –, Levinas points out that one’s bodily functions cannot be replaced or fulfilled by someone else.\textsuperscript{86} Never can there be two people in one person’s shoes. Therefore, the experience that someone is having can never be experienced by someone else at the same time, in the same way. The only way to come close to sharing one’s experiences, is through language, implying that a subject’s experiences are accessible, but only to a certain degree. Because of this embodied subject, Levinas, again, understates the mystery that is to the Other, but – at the same time – he always regards it as a positive aspect. Because of the bodily needs and vulnerabilities everyone has, a subject – when faced with the Other – will immediately recognize and look out for the Other’s needs.\textsuperscript{87} As the analyses also showed, this recognition is before everything else and even before the intervention of language. As it turns out – because of the visibility of abject bodies and body parts – the photos are able to pierce the viewer before the narrative comes into play. The vulnerability of the body is turned into an ethical demand when the Other is seen in distress, for in that moment it is not about the needs of the self, but it is a plead for involvement and humanity; turning the embodied body into the prerequisite for moral consideration.\textsuperscript{88}

All of the aforementioned aspects of Levinas’ influences and his own developments come together in his notion of ‘the face of the Other’.

3.2 Experiencing Harsh Realities

Because of the non-exchangeable aspects of the embodied body, the Other remains irreducible and infinitive. However, the transcending infinity of the Other is to some

\textsuperscript{83} In order to emphasize the importance of alterity in Levinas’ work, I will be using ‘the Other’ throughout this thesis. The viewer will be addressed by ‘the other’ or ‘the self’.
\textsuperscript{84} Hand, S. (2009), p40.
\textsuperscript{86} Mensch, J.R. (2015), p8.
\textsuperscript{87} Levinas, E.; (Transl.) Lingis, A. (1961), p200.
\textsuperscript{88} On this subject, Levinas deviates from Heidegger and his notion of \textit{Dasein}, for in Heidegger’s theory there is consideration for the other, but not for the embodied subject.
extent made tangible by the exterior of the Other. The three chosen and analysed photographs all feature the face of the Other. They are varied examples; the face of an old man, a middle-aged woman and a young girl. However, as the previous chapter has pointed out, they share an emphasize on the human flesh and the exteriority of humans.

Mainly the face of the Other is what visualizes the infinity of the Other. This is because the face is not a demarcated feature, but it creates a space between the self and the Other; the face is able to ‘speak’. For the Other always remains partly unknown and therefore endless, and because the face calls out from an ethical perspective, the Other poses as the ultimate example of goodness. Because of this ability to be the model for moral integrity, it is able to comment on the self's actions. The presence of the Other can, therefore, actively contest one’s interpretation and perspective. It is however important to re-emphasize that this intense dialectical relationship is not a negative one according to Levinas. Even though this relationship is immediate and therefore perhaps unavoidable, it is not a relationship that restrains the power of the self. Levinas believes that: ‘the face speaks to me and thereby invites me to a relation incommensurate with a power exercise’. The unforeseeable reaction of the Other is a reminder that the Other is not an opposing power that defies the self’s power, but rather opposes the self’s ability for power. The presence of the Other is therefore often welcomed by the other. Bangert’s photo of the older man is a very explicit example of a face in need – a face that makes an ethical demand –, however, all three photos show subjects whose bodily situations are unimaginable. Excruciating pain, the ultimate physical sacrifice and the forever closed eyes of a child who have barely seen the world. Because of this immediate demand posed by the Others, they seem to initially transcend their positions in the world and, instead, their humanity and alterity is foregrounded. It is not about whom is fighting who and why, it is about the tragic loss of lives we will never get to know. Therefore, the faces create a place of an incomprehensible and unreachable infinity.

Why does the presence of the Other have such an intrusive effect? For the face of the Other is the only visual handhold of infinity, assessing what one can expect of the

Other becomes very difficult. Others can therefore match and differ on a lot of different levels. That is why the presence of the incomprehensible Other implies that the viewer has to handle perspectives that perhaps vary widely with the opinions of the viewer. As a result, the self is constantly reminded of its own ontology being constructed by others, leading to uncomfortable feelings. These feelings are uncomfortable and incomprehensible because of the fact that the self does not know what the appropriate feelings and expectations would be, for becoming is a never ending, ongoing process full of aspects that are out of own’s reach.

For Levinas, these multitude of perspectives are welcomed by the self, however, one can wonder to what extent this is still the case. The fact that the indigestible images which prominently feature the face of the Other are not being published, might be an indication of quite an un-welcome position regarding the existence of other and challenging opinions. Perhaps wanting to know the whole story is not what makes us humans, but the feeling of having control over others is. However, it has become clear that the face of the Other – no matter if it is the face of an old man, middle-aged woman or young girl – calls out to the other from an ethical perspective. For, because of its transcending infinity, it can pose as the ultimate form of morality. However, since the face of the Other implies a multitude of perspectives – which can never fully be obtained and can even deviate quite heavily from the self’s lifeworld – the images that feature these faces can become, in every sense of the word, indigestible.

95 Mensch, J.R. (2015), p120.
Conclusion

"Don’t adventures ever have an end? I suppose not.
Someone else always has to carry on the story."96

"The war slumbers, keeping one eye always open".97

In this thesis, I have tried to shed light on photographs that otherwise might have stayed in the twilight. In order to better understand these images, I have tried to investigate the problem of indigestibility, through the unpublished photos of the Iraq War, made by Christoph Bangert, Eros Hoagland and Stephanie Sinclair. To answer this question I have, in succession, summarized the situation these images deviate from, analysed the workings of indigestible images, and interpreted the uncomfortable feelings the images brought forward by means of Emmanuel Levinas' theory of the face of the Other from an ethical perspective.

The images that are featured in this thesis are not easy to look at, but that is exactly the reason why they are so important. On an everyday basis, we come across a lot of images that feature atrocious situations. The fact that there are photos that remain hidden – because they are too much to handle – proves that, fortunately, there are images that are still able to make us stop and think. These photographs, as I have argued, are 'indigestible images', for they defy comprehension and they “[are] not letting themselves be absorbed by a story that takes the viewer away”.98 These images do not only show us terrible things, but by simply looking at them, they make us feel physically terrible. That has to do with the fact that these images do not only attract attention to their subject. They also put forward and present their photographic nature and they make the viewer aware of the act of witnessing and looking at these photographs. As it turns out by the usage of the notions of the studium and punctum, the abject, and the face of the Other, this is because the photos defy their narratives by making alienating parts of the human body visible and therefore making an ethical demand on the viewer.

Also, it has become clear that these images differ quite heavily from the photographic discourse the media mostly put forward during the Iraq War. The illusion was created of a distant, impersonal war. Consequently, the Western media often

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98 Van Vree, F. (2010), p278.
followed the grand narrative of being in Iraq to bring peace, and therefore showed a sanitized version of the gruesome situations during the chaotic war; without blood, pain and mutilated bodies. There were, however, photographers that did make photos of the gruesomeness the war brought forward. Photographers Christoph Bangert, Eros Hoagland and Stephanie Sinclair have all made photographs that were not published, because of their subject and because of the fact that looking at the images can be indigestible.

Therefore, to analyse these kinds of images, a special methodological framework was needed. Theorist Roland Barthes provided the necessary tools, by means of his notions of the studium and the punctum. The studium-like approach showed that Bangert’s compelling photo is able to – at the same time – display hopelessness and strength. Hoagland’s photo shows what can (willingly and unwillingly) happen to the human body in times of war and how lives are discarded and forgotten. Sinclair’s photograph implies the vulnerability of people in times of war. Besides these narrative implications, they also have an aspect in common, namely alienating the human body. Because of the fact that the bodies transgress boundaries and, therefore, are normally kept out of sight, they become abject bodies. The swollen hand, the slit throat and the fake-looking face; they are the details that are able to puncture the viewer, and are thus what Barthes has called the punctum. As it turns out, the photographs are also able to rupture time, as if they are ghosts themselves which haunt the viewer.

However, what is it exactly that makes looking at these images an uncomfortable act, since we are often exposed to unusual phenomena? Philosopher Emmanuel Levinas has formulated a theoretical framework that proved very useful in answering that question. Levinas was influenced by the philosophers Husserl and Heidegger, but also deviated significantly from them. Primarily his approach to decentralize the themes of ontology and epistemology, and centralize alterity and ethics is what made him stand out. His critical thinking is based on the belief that a subject cannot be reduced or universalized. Every subject has, for example, physical needs that cannot be fulfilled by someone else. The Other therefore poses as a place of infinitive possibilities. This infinity of the Other reaches the other before anything else, and its alterity therefore transcends everything, even the other’s being or knowledge. This transcendence is partly tangible in the form of the face of the Other. The face of the Other can visualize the needs of the Other and therefore make an ethical demand on the self. Because of its alterity, however,
the self is not able to estimate the being of the Other. Consequently, the self will never be completely comfortable with the Other, for the Other poses the possibility of different and unexpected perspectives. For Levinas, this ongoing intrusive, dialectical relationship is one that is welcomed by the self.

The fact that the images that feature the faces of the Other are being hidden, however, can be seen as proof that the other does not want to constantly be exposed to other opinions and perspectives. One reason for this effect might be the implication that the Other cannot be reduced by the other, but can be kept hidden. My intention, therefore, was to bring these photographs to the surface and to the light. Furthermore, this thesis has revealed that indigestible images can haunt the viewer, because the narratives of the photos are being disrupted by rupturing photographic details. This rupture is uncomfortable and indigestible for the viewer, because he/she is subjected to the exposure of different perspectives that might not match his own. The self therefore might not be able to maintain the safe narrative he/she has created and constructed for himself/herself. In today’s society, it is however very important to surround ourselves with others and their opinions, in order to avoid totalitarian thinking. Moreover, we should not be afraid of images that expose us to mind widening opinions. Photography proves to be a good medium to exactly do so; photography can be subversive, especially “when it is pensive, when it thinks”.

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Images

Image 1: American soldiers on an Iraqi bridge. Takahashi, K. (2003) [http://kuni.photoshelter.com/index/C0000f1Hi9xXbQ8Y](http://kuni.photoshelter.com/index/C0000f1Hi9xXbQ8Y)

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