

A Double 'Double Take'

Kobi Kabalek and Zuzanna Dziuban

Where does a picture, a visual depiction of an act of violence, locate us, the observers? Whose perspective do we adopt and/or perform, when we are confronted with an image of the tormented body, the object of pain and suffering of a vulnerable victim, with or without the presence of the perpetrators? In what follows, we start with discussing the propensity to adopt certain positionalities in facing these questions, and their analytic and ethical implications, to suggest a reading that could unsettle this familiar repertoire – a double 'double take'.

The insights of Carolyn Dean in discussing Daniel J. Goldhagen's book *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (1996) seem relevant here, despite of the different medium of expression they address.¹ In reviewing the book's many critics, Dean points to Goldhagen's attempt to uncover the brutality of the perpetrators by providing extensive and detailed descriptions of their violence against Jews, which 'transforms sadistic and voyeuristic impulses into a virtuous quest for truth'. But, at the same time, this voyeuristic logic 'also identifies the reader with the perpetrators, contaminating any pure identification with victims'² – whatever 'purity' is to mean in this context. In other words, the moral indignation that propels the historian's wish to expose the criminals' motivations by focusing on a minute portrayal of their crimes, so goes the argument, ends up replicating both victims' and perpetrators' perspectives and experiences: 'The reader is thereby identified both with the perpetrators' shameless, objectifying, morally numb gaze and with the moral outrage proper to witnessing atrocities against innocents.'³ Dean sees the emerging conundrum as going beyond the problematic features of Goldhagen's or any other specific historical representation, thus pointing to an

The project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (GMM – grant agreement No 816784).

- 1 Daniel J. Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Vintage 2001).
- 2 Carolyn J. Dean, 'History Writing, Numbness, and the Restoration of Dignity', *History of the Human Sciences*, 17.2/3 (2004), 57–96 (pp. 63–64).
- 3 *Ibid.*, 64.

Journal of Perpetrator Research 2.2 (2019), 58–62

DOI: 10.21039/jpr.2.2.50 © 2019 by the Authors



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

inherent difficulty in the representation of historical knowledge of this event and of the emotions associated with it.

This problematic seems not to be unique to the Holocaust and may be indicative of many of 'our' moral judgments and the difficulty (perhaps impossibility) of disengaging the perspectival orientation of perpetrators and victims. The late philosopher Agnes Heller has argued that

our moral nature is split between the two biblical archetypes, Abel and Cain. Subconsciously, whether we are the victims or the perpetrators, we all have the resentful, murderous instincts of Cain. On the level of moral consciousness, however, we identify with Abel, the sufferer.⁴

In itself, the wish to identify with the victims, to commemorate their suffering, and to prevent such violence from taking place in the future are worthy moral engagements. But in the process of making violence visible, in aiming to arouse people's indignation toward the acts, the distinction between victim and perpetrator may be conflated. On the one hand, our rejection, repulsion, and wish to look away might direct itself toward the weak, helpless victims and the situation they are in, rather than toward the perpetrators alone. On the other hand, our fascination with the horror and 'evil' might also testify to a certain envy we share, of perpetrators who are *free* to express and exercise the 'resentful, murderous instincts' that Heller sees embodied in Cain – a certain admiration of criminals, who, as Walter Benjamin has observed, rebel against the constraints of society through their violent actions.⁵

And yet, if we are willing to accept our (at least latent) double perspective as inevitable or even necessary, an ethical standpoint may indeed emerge that would go beyond a simple wish to identify with the victims to imagining ourselves as potential perpetrators or enabling bystanders. Therefore, a more insightful ethical message may arise by employing depictions of violence that challenge viewers and make them aware that they may adopt both victims' and perpetrators' perspectives or move beyond the two. We believe that Jojakim Cortis and Adrian Sonderegger's *Double Take* poster, showing a diorama of the Abu Ghraib torture photographs, might enable such a complex, double, perspective.⁶

4 Summarized in E. W. Clowes, 'Constructing the Memory of the Holocaust: The Ambiguous Treatment of Babii Yar in Soviet Literature', *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas*, 3.2 (2005), 153–182 (p. 157).

5 Walter Benjamin, 'Critique of Violence', in *On Violence: A Reader*, ed. by Bruce B. Lawrence and Aisha Karim (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 268–285 (p. 271).

6 Jojakim Cortis and Adrian Sonderegger, *Double Take*, 2019, exhibition poster, C/O Berlin.

Double Take seems to ask the viewers to reconsider the seemingly clear distinction that exists between these perspectives. In other words, it makes room for questioning the distinction *observers* are commonly inclined to make between the two *perspectives* (of victims and perpetrators).

Jacques Derrida's discussion of the frame (*parergon*), which rejects any simple opposition between the work of art and its surroundings, the cut that seemingly separates them, might be useful to think through *Double Take*.⁷ Framing refers to the setting (or accepting) of difference between the examined object, as having stable content and meaning, and that which is beyond it, a difference marked by the object's edges. But Derrida points to the cracks that reside within frames, creating moments of communication at the site of the dividing line of inside-outside. The cracks, and occasional movements or adjustments of the frame, alter our conception of the relationship and the distinction between two seemingly separate entities, the work of art and its surroundings or context. The focus on the frame introduces the performative aspect (or potential) of the work of art but also of the frame itself, which enables a positionality, a perspective, to emerge. Rather than conceiving of a painting as a direct or truthful recounting of reality or as having an integral, unchanging truth within it, Derrida's argument that the 'truth in painting' is both internal and external conceives it as a doing (a visual 'speech act' of sorts), whose meaning depends on the particular situation in which it is performed and the framing in which it is placed. The framing, therefore, produces the work and its meaning by positioning it *vis-à-vis* or against what lies outside/beyond.

Double Take may be seen as articulating Derrida's observations in a number of ways. First, it does so through the choice to recreate, rather than merely depict, the torture using the medium of diorama. This diorama, a meticulous transformation of a two-dimensional photograph into a three-dimensional figure, replicates not only the scene of violence, but also the tormented body and its manipulation. Its reproduction of the figure as an object thus parallels (at least symbolically) the objectification and dehumanization of the prison inmate by the American guards in the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq in 2003. The diorama maker thus introduces the aspect of observers' performance of the violence depicted and the option of further reproducing it in the present, rather than assigning it to a defined and foregone past. Furthermore, in choosing to portray the tormented body, with head completely cov-

7 Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

ered and body shape distorted, but without showing the prison guards themselves (who do appear in some of the existing footage), the possibility of assigning responsibility to specific perpetrators (and marking them as 'others') is diminished. The diorama thus places viewers in a position that combines the victim's helplessness with the victimizer's control in a way that incorporates what is explicitly described in the diorama with its implicit surroundings – 'we' are not merely viewers anymore but, performatively, made into participants of/in the scene.

The performative aspect of the visual framing of violence is enhanced by the artists' choice to photograph not the diorama alone, but also the various instruments and materials used to create it. By taking a 'step back' from the diorama itself, the photograph removes it from its original surrounding and introduces a new situation, in the home or studio of the artists, thereby revealing, beyond the original scene, a viewer's fascination with the violence. But, even more so, the tools and materials, themselves a Derridean *parergon*, further destabilize the cut. We are implicated in a violence in the making, confronted with the mechanism through which it comes about, through which the difference between the victim and the perpetrator comes into being – sometimes contingent precisely on the means through which such distinctions are established: the ability, better yet, the power to *frame* and control the reality effects of framing. The location of the poster next to the Amerika Haus in Berlin, where the exhibition was shown, further enhances this interpretation, placing the scene of violence in the everyday environment of construction works and mundane concerns next to Berlin's *Zoologischer Garten* train station, with its constant flow of people, allowing for additional ways to imagine its potential recurrence and adaptation in the present, perhaps with the use of different materials and instruments, perhaps with different reality effects.

The shifting or loss of the accepted frame of the original photograph, along with the clear distinction between outside and inside, implies a loss of protection, an unsettling recognition of our potential involvement in despicable acts. The borders of time and space, which allow viewers to confine the scene of torment and violence to others – perpetrators in another time and place – and thus to distance ourselves from them, are challenged by these acts of framing and re-framing, 'allowing things usually considered 'off-frame' [...] to move into this permeable frame, opening it to risk.'⁸ In this case, the risk is

8 Ranjana Khanna, 'Frames, Contexts, Community, Justice', *Diacritics*, 33.2 (2003), 11–41 (pp. 15–16).

the affront involved upon realizing that we, as viewers/participants of a visual depiction of violence, might not only become victims, but also perpetrators or at least fascinated consumers of violence, unless we at least try to unsettle the frame.

Works Cited

- Benjamin, Walter, 'Critique of Violence', in *On Violence: A Reader*, ed. by Bruce B. Lawrence and Aisha Karim (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 268–285
- Clowes, E. W., 'Constructing the Memory of the Holocaust: The Ambiguous Treatment of Babii Yar in Soviet Literature', *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas*, 3.2 (2005), 153–182
- Cortis, Jojakim, and Adrian Sonderegger, *Double Take*, 2019, exhibition poster, C/O Berlin Dean, Carolyn J., 'History Writing, Numbness, and the Restoration of Dignity', *History of the Human Sciences*, 17.2/3 (2004), 57–96
- Derrida, Jacques, *The Truth in Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987)
- Goldhagen, Daniel J., *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Vintage 2001)
- Khanna, Ranjana, 'Frames, Contexts, Community, Justice', *Diacritics*, 33.2 (2003), 11–41

Kobi Kabalek is Assistant Professor of Holocaust Studies and Visual Studies at Penn State University (Germanic and Slavic Languages and Literatures and Jewish Studies).

Zuzanna Dziuban is Senior postdoc at the Institute of Culture Studies and Theatre History of the Austrian Academy of Sciences within the framework of the ERC Project 'Globalised Memorial Museums: Exhibiting Atrocities in the Era of Claims for Moral Universals'.