

Hollow Images: How artists recall collective memory through images of absence.

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Each day, each minute, each second, thousands of images are being uploaded on to the internet. Data centers are overheating all over our planet suffocating us in an image-based culture. The 21st century seems to have become a race between Google, Facebook, Apple and Microsoft to see whose virtual memory can store the most pixels.

The cheap almighty digital photograph has revolutionized the WWW. Internet is not the only media to have been affected by the digital revolution. Since our aeries no longer receive analog signals, but digital, the media have created a whole range of news channels all over the world. Journalists are sending in images to feed Breaking News stories. Recently, the revival of the conflict between Israel and Palestine has been the opportunity for these same journalists to nourish our minds with images of horror and destruction. Unfortunately, the build-up of images does not have the same effect on us as they used to do.

The fascination – or we should say petrification – which normally takes hold of us when we see such images of horror seems to have been annihilated, as though we have been desensitized. We can compare this effect with children who repeatedly watch violent films on TV and stock the images in the area of their brain reserved for deep trauma.

It seems almost impossible to create a collective memory when the virtual memory we feed every second is grotesquely greedy and ever growing.

However, another type of image has found its way amidst the accursed media image: one which we shall call, using Raphaële Bertho's expression, « the hollow image »¹. In order to take a step back from the media image and move away from the direct event, artists have turned to this type of image.

We shall first take a look at Pavel Maria Smejkal's series, *Fatescapes*, which questions the use of photographs used by the media in terms of propaganda or which have influenced our general knowledge, such as Robert Capa's *Death of a Republican Soldier* or

¹ Hollow image is translated from the French 'image en creux', an expression Raphaële Bertho uses in her article, "Retour sur les lieux de l'évènement: l'image « en creux »", available online, <http://imagesrevues.revues.org/336>.

the famous *Tank Man*. Erasing the presence of the human body he has created a form of hollow image.

We shall then widen our interrogation of how the hollow image searches to question our collective memory through the works of Paul Seawright, Sophie Ristelhueber or Bart Michiels.

Being an artist, I have used this strategy in my own art work when following the steps of the many escapees, Jews and allied soldiers who fled through the Pyrenean Mountains during WW2. I shall question the use of the hollow image associated with certain testimony of this event.

Pavel Maria Smejkal received the Critical Mass Award for his series of fifty images *Fatescapes*². The images are a collection of some of the most famous photographs ever used by the media. Exploring the photographic medium and its function as a document, Smejkal has uploaded the chosen images into a well-known tool: Adobe Photoshop. While the media commonly uses Photoshop to manipulate images, Smejkal makes use of the program to delete whatever has made these photographs historical. *1989, Beijing* shows nothing but a main road. Smejkal has deleted the line of army tanks travelling down Chang'an Avenue on June the 5th 1989 in order to repress the protest on Tiananmen Square and the '89 Democracy Movement. Hence, all we see are the yellow lines and white arrows that construct the image. In April 1998, *Time* magazine included the unknown rebel, who Smejkal has also erased, among the one hundred most important people of the century. The "Tank Man", as he has been named, had been immortalized in Jeff Widener's photograph. Widener's photograph becomes an image, as in *imago*. As Serge Tisseron reminds us, the *imago*, in Antique Rome was a portrait, a mask moulded in wax, the print of the deceased, which families would keep in the Atrium, generation after generation³. Tisseron notes that the Latin fresco was an attempt to stop Time. Therefore, the *imago* represented the "crucial moment"⁴, the passage from life

² Pavel Smejkal's series *Fatescapes* can be seen online : <http://www.pavelmaria.com/fatescapes01.html>

³ Serge Tisseron, *Le mystère de la chambre claire*, Paris, Les belles lettres/Archimbaud, 1996, pp 52,53.

⁴ Idem.

to death. The type of photograph Smejkal has used in his series meets with this definition of the *imago*.

However, when the photographer erases the object – the tank or the flag, or the presence of the human body – something else happens to the photograph. Smejkal also chose the two widely discussed photographs of Capa's *Death of a Republican Soldier* in 1936 and Eddie Adam's *Death of a Vietcong in 1968*. Both bodies disappear in the artist's work. All that is left is a Spanish landscape in one and a street in Saigon in the other. All the same, we are well aware of what was there, of what happened there at that precise moment. Smejkal's photographs are still *imagos* for our general knowledge and the choice of his title remind us of that very precise moment. Smejkal's ingenious deletion enables the viewer to reflect on these images and his images carry a new meaning, a hollow meaning.

We should note that "hollow" stems from the Old English *hol*, itself from the Proto-Indo-European *kel-*, meaning "to beguile", "feign", "charm", "cajole" or "deceive". The word came to mean "cover up" or "conceal", and later on "cave" and "cavity". Smejkal's images do conceal and cover up, considering that, even though one would say he has deleted or erased different elements from the original photograph, he has in fact *covered* them up. We must take into account that to erase an element on Adobe Photoshop, one must copy small portions of pixels from the photograph itself to conceal whatever element needs removing. Therefore, Smejkal is *covering up* and *concealing*.

Smejkal also chose to work on James Natchwey's photograph of a Somali mother carrying her dead son, revealing the horror of famine. Following this Photoshop manipulation, Natchwey's image becomes a vast arid landscape. However, mother and son are still there, still present, concealed behind the many pixels which compose the empty landscape.

Once again, behind another of Smejkal's empty landscapes, behind the openness of the Kerch Peninsula people mourn as they recover the dead bodies. In 1942, as part of the Nazi's "ethnic-cleansing", thousands of Jews and Russians were removed or sent to camps. In Kerch, seven thousand people were slaughtered and thrown into a ditch. Natchwey's photograph depicts both the horror of this frightful episode and the sorrow of the families. All that is left in Smejkal's image is the eerie specter of our collective memory.

The hollowness is one that deceives at a glance. Smejkal presents to us a beautiful sepia photograph of a road travelling into the distance. But hiding in the valley, in the *hollow*

are hundreds of cannonballs. There in the shadow of the valley lingers on the shadow of death as depicted in Roger Fenton's 1855 photograph, *The Valley of the Shadow of Death*, taken during the Crimean war. Fenton's photograph may have been one of the first hollow images in the history of photography. Both in Roger Fenton's 1855 photograph and in Smejkal's images, something lingers on through the photograph, noting that the landscapes were often the scene of long and atrocious battles.

To parallel the road which travels through Smejkal's *1855, Crimea*, we shall take a look at both Paul Seawright's series *Hidden* and Sophie Ristelhueber's series *Eleven Blowups*. Both series include a photograph of a road, resembling Fenton's *Valley* in Crimea.

Paul Seawright's dirt road in Afghanistan is littered with bomb shells: a contemporary version of Fenton's photograph which shows how sadly History repeats itself. Paul Seawright was commissioned by the Imperial War Museum in London to create an artistic response to the war in Afghanistan in 2002. *Hidden* is a series of photographs of minefields and battle sites. We should note that the title of this series *Hidden* goes back to the invisible and to what is concealed – this being the first meaning of “hollow”. The subtle colouring of the earth and atmosphere, one of pale and light colours, clashes with the underlying threat of bomb shells, mine fields and war ruins. Christine Buignet, a French photographer and researcher, when interrogating the aesthetics of distance or exit⁵ remarks that:

All these images, which encourage us to meditate on the consequences of war, on the excess of their impact on nature – but the places silently speak to us of men too – don't directly offend the viewer's sensitivity, and particularly because they are... beautiful!⁶

However, once the viewer has recognized the beauty of the images, he immediately becomes aware of something else, which makes him ill at ease.

⁵ Translation of Dominique Bacqué's expression « la stratégie du retrait ».

⁶ Christine Buignet, « Notes et questionnements sur les représentations photographiques de la guerre », in *L'image et les traversées de l'histoire – Documents, médias et pratiques artistiques*, Pau, P.U.P., 2008, p53, (translation, Bridget Sheridan).

Sophie Ristelhueber's *Eleven Blowups # 1* is the same kind of road that travels into the horizon, as in Fenton's and Seawright's photographs. Here, the silvery grey surface of tar crumbles just like the pigments of colour an artist uses. The image is one of sublime beauty, a mix of aesthetic appreciation and of horror. All the same, Ristelhueber's photographs are those of cavities, created by military war craft. The cavity of Ristelhueber's blowup echoes the hollow of the image. Raphaële Bertho, who we mentioned earlier, calls these images *images en creux*. The word *creux* in French can be translated by "hollow" in English. In French, *creuser* means "to dig". It is interesting to point out that Ristelhueber's *Blowup* resembles a dig. We could even mention an archeological dig as we are in fact dealing with memory too. However, *creuser* in French connotes ideas of frenzy and animalism. It seems as though she is desperately trying to get to the bottom of things and to reveal what is concealed. Taking a step back from the media document, as does Ristelhueber, is "exchanging the visible against thought" as Dominique Bacqué points out in *La photographie plasticienne, L'extrême contemporain*.⁷ Her photograph also conveys an idea of scarification, that of the people and that of the land. The hollow visible in her photograph seems to dig right through the image as though the scar were left gaping open.

Bart Michiels' photographs are quite different in that they reveal nothing of the past. However, Sarah Stanley notes that "Picturing the abiding state of nature reveals the gulf that will always remain between the earth's ecology and the ecology of war. Collapsing time and triggering memory, the images from *The Course of History* call our attention to the ways that landscapes speak of, and remain mute about, the past".⁸ As one turns the pages of his book *The Course of History*, one is confronted with a series of the most exquisite landscapes. Albeit, his images are too still - devoid of human presence. Flat fields spread out towards the horizon where grey clouds hang in the sky or where fog fills the air. Empty land is covered in luscious earth and grass. Michiels explains that:

⁷ Dominique Baqué, « La Stratégie du retrait », in *Photographie plasticienne, L'Extrême contemporain*, Paris, Editions du Regard, 2004, p. 237-264, (translation, Bridget Sheridan).

⁸ S.Stanley, *Afterimage*, 2005.

For *The Course of History*, I set out to portray the once blood soaked sites of Europe's former battlefields from Troy until the end of the Second World War, not by showing the obvious scars (if any), monuments, memorials and war cemeteries but by portraying happenstance marks or subtle features that allude to a violent past or evoke collective memory within the sublime and pastoral character of landscape.⁹

What is there in his photographs but absence – the absence of atrocity as Sonja Fessel calls it? She notes the interest in place in this kind of photograph and the “tight and inseparable relation between history and place”.¹⁰ One can visit the monuments or the memorials which stand near these places of horror. However, we can say that standing in front of Michiels' photographs calls back more than expected. *Omaha Beach 1944* pictures soft yellow sand and a pale sea that dissolves into the atmosphere. The beauty of Michiels' photograph takes one step back from the horror of what happened to these beaches on D-Day. Barbed wire, bodies and blood have been buried in the depths of this hollow image. The title of the picture brings us back face to face with the event. We therefore remember more than standing in front of any memorial. These photographs could easily be taken for what Pierre Nora calls a *lieu de mémoire*¹¹, “where memory crystallizes and secretes itself”.¹² Nora's definition is quite broad, but it is interesting to point out that hollow images can be a more powerful “monument” than any stone and wreath. The hollow between the historical event and the photograph fetches deep into our memory. It is at that precise moment, when the unbearable meets with aesthetic pleasure that we sense the sublime.

Nora's *lieu de mémoire* can even be embodied in a minute of silence. We could also consider a commemorative walk being a *lieu de mémoire*. Here, I shall introduce my own use of photography in relation to memory.

⁹ B.Michiels, <http://www.bartmichiels.com/Projects/the-course-of-history>

¹⁰ http://www.bartmichiels.com/www/resources/The_Absence_of_Atrocitiy.pdf

¹¹ Memorial site/memorial.

¹² P.Nora, « Between Memory and History : Les lieux de mémoire », in *Representations* 26, Spring 89, pp7–9.

I have been living in Saint-Girons, a town in the South of France for over twenty years. Over this period of time, I have made contact with men and women who crossed over the mountains to escape the Nazis during WW2. Having listened to their stories, I cannot look at the mountains without imagining the thousands of people who crossed the border in order to escape from the Nazi dictatorship. It is as if the memory of this exile had seeped into the landscape.

In 2013, I finally made the decision to go on a four day hike through the Pyrenees from France into Spain, following the steps of the escapees. The hike is a well-marked trail called *The Trail of Freedom*. Each year over one hundred walkers gather in the French town of Saint-Girons to cross over the border to Esterri d'Aneu in Spain to remember the thousands of French, Jews, and allied soldiers who fled from the Nazis during WW2.

My intention was to photograph the ground and the landscape, using my camera as a tool to search for traces of the past. Walking the Trail of Freedom, I could constantly hear the words of those I had listened to. The photographs echoed both their footsteps and their words while I walked the path many had walked to escape over the mountains.

The path is a hollow in itself. We even use the word to describe a certain type of path: one which travels between cultivated fields, bordered by small stonewalls and trees. The path circulates from one photograph to the next in my work, retracing the steps of the escapees. David Le Breton has noted how the path is like a memory that is engraved in the ground. He also points out how a path can be the scar left behind from those who walked the land.¹³ Moreover, Christian Verrier believes that the path is haunted by those who have frequented it. When having listened to the accounts of various escapees and the expression of pain that their feet endured, we may argue that not only does the past haunt these paths, so do the paths haunt the escapees. The paths are certainly hollow. In turn, they conceal and then reveal memory.

Together with quotes from the accounts of those who escaped from France, the photographs take a step back from the terror that the escapes felt while walking these paths. The quotes, which are superimposed on each path, are quotes from testimonies. The few lines that I chose to add to the photograph are the following:

¹³ D.LeBreton, *Marcher, Eloge des chemins et de la lenteur*, Paris, Ed.Métailié, 2012, p37.

“I made myself sandals with some old tires, so as not to spread suspicion amongst the Germans.”

“Imagine the difficulty of walking in these conditions, especially when some of our comrades were wearing casual shoes with crepe soles.”

“Unfortunately, one of my soles was loose: I repaired it with wire.”¹⁴

The quotes are in relation to what the escapees were wearing on their feet or in relation to the pain they suffered as they were walking. The feet are the contact point between the path and the walking bodies who fled across the mountains. The writing sinks into the hollow of the path, just as the memory seems to have sunk into the landscape.

The artists we have referred to in this paper have all used the same strategy of exit. However, each photographer has developed the hollow image in their own way. Smejkal has borrowed well-known images in which he has erased specific signs in order to question time and place. Seawright and Ristelhueber’s use of aesthetic images disturbs the viewer as he notes signs of conflict. On the contrary, Bart Michiels’ photographs of empty landscapes reveal conflict only through the title. The viewer must search for other subtle signs in the image, once he understands how the series functions.

The gap is what we have called “hollow” – “Hollow” meaning both to conceal and to create depth. We have also noted that in French the word *creuser* means “to dig”. Whether the photograph may be that of a bomb which has dug up the surface of a road or whether it may be that of a path as in my *Trail of Freedom*, the hollow image seems to dig up thoughts and memories in the viewer’s mind.

This photographic strategy has clearly a more powerful effect than the direct media image. The hollow image is one that gives the viewer an opportunity to think and to remember, thus becoming what Nora calls a *lieu de mémoire*, “a memorial site”.

¹⁴ All these are quotes from testimonies of escapees and soldiers. The testimonies can be consulted at La Maison du Chemin de la Liberté museum, Saint-Girons, France.

