

# THE FRESCO OF ICONS

## ON THE DREADFUL DETAILS BY ERIC BAUDELAIRE

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*What can a war image do? The Dreadful Details, a diptych composed by Eric Baudelaire, proposes an answer. The piece, a “grand machine” on modern forms of conflict, revisits all of the images of war that haunt us. It also engages in a subterranean exchange with Gilles Deleuze. In the process, we understand how a beautiful photographic image can, in a single stroke, let us see again and reaffirm the sacred persistence of the human.*

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Eric Baudelaire photographed the second (or third) Iraq war in Hollywood, on a set used by a number of actual TV productions, with thoughts of *Over There* in his mind. The work that resulted is both a radical critique and layered apology of those clichés that haunt our souls, our screens and our literature. Let us try to understand how this apology can be thus woven into the critique, to a point where both the images of war and their traditional justifications seem linked in an infinite regress.

The piece is a vast fresco, nearly 7 by 12 feet, filled with heroes and suffering, blood, smoke and jarring contrasts (on the one hand the rubble, smashed watermelons, and severed legs in the foreground, and on the other the apparent tranquility of the hills in the background). A first layer of meaning leaps out at us: this is a fresco that symbolizes modern warfare. Meaning neither great conventional battles nor guerrilla warfare as practiced by jungle partisans or other guevarist “focos,” but an urban guerilla war where conventional troops, local recruits and civilians are intertwined. It seems to be a “grand machine” in the sense used by Delacroix: a great piece, extremely composed, expressive both in the power of its overall movement and the precision of its minute details. A piece that attempts to reconstitute the full grandeur of a great event, both in its tragedy (*The Death of Sardanapale*) and in its triumphant bestiality (the *Attila* of the National Assembly dome).

Yet the piece seems to have been produced to function backwards. First of all, the image is fractured in its center: there is a single photogram, but it is presented as a diptych, deliberately and immediately shattering any promise of unity or overall movement. Furthermore, the movement seems at once frozen and carved into zones of visibility and meaning that are each almost hermetically sealed off from one another. One quickly notices that there is *in fact* neither action nor spontaneous overall movement. The characters are actors striking a pose; a hieratic or falsely natural pose. Slowly, one begins to understand that each zone of visibility is essentially autonomous, and only relates to the others through the medium of two artificial devices: the unity of the set’s pastiche and the single photographic shot. And finally, although the work is titled *The Dreadful Details*, upon close scrutiny one observes no such frightful minutiae: the child in her mother’s arms, probably dead, shows no traces of blood; the other corpses, when not hidden under a blanket, show neither mutilation nor gaping wounds; no cries of desperation are heard; no acts of bestiality are shown. In truth, the details themselves are no more realistic than the overall composition. Its truth lies in between, in the juxtaposition of its motifs and sequences. This is an anti-fresco.

It is only when one has arrived at this view that the true “mise en abîme” (infinite regress) begins between the clichés of war and their justification. Here, the term cliché must be taken seriously, in the sense of ready-made images, devoid of affect because they are already known and pre-digested, and are present both within the viewer (in the form of blurry and overwhelming memories) and in front of the viewer (in the form of worn out images in magazines and advertising), thus rendering obsolete any distinction between interior and exterior, between the spirit and the real

world, between us and them, between actor and spectator. And this is an essential notion in Deleuzian esthetic modernism: in a world submerged in images, art images can exist only through merciless battle with clichés. More precisely, if one were to believe fully in the “untimely” value of his philosophy (in a nod to Nietzsche), one could say that Deleuze devoted at least two texts to Eric Baudelaire’s *Dreadful Details*. The first deals with the crisis of what Deleuze calls the “action-image,” an image capable of embodying in a “grand form” relationships between environment and behaviors. More specifically, he wrote the following, inspired by Godard (in *Cinema 1. The Movement Image*, Minnesota University Press, 1986, pp. 214-215):

“[I]f images have become clichés, internally as well as externally, how can an Image be extracted from all these clichés, “just an image,” an autonomous mental image? An image must emerge from the set of clichés... With what politics and what consequences? What is an image that would not be a cliché? Where does the cliché end and the image begin?”

How not to read in this quote the precise program of Eric Baudelaire’s piece: first of all, to express the crisis of the image-action, emphasizing the extent to which war images can no longer convey the slightest “grand form” but only multiply poisonous clichés; and then “extract an image from all these clichés.” Because everything here is either cliché or reference to clichés. Cliché of the dead sniper, who has been set up in a pose, just like Alexander Gardner had set up his *Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter* during the American Civil War. The body, in the background against the wall, to the left of the right-hand panel, is a quasi-citation, and the very title of the piece, *The Dreadful Details*, comes from the caption of a plate (no. 36) in *Gardner’s Photography Sketchbook of the War, 1865-1866*. More photojournalistic clichés, recent ones this time: how can one avoid being swept back to Vietnam by the left side of the left-hand panel, between a woman opening her arms facing an armed soldier who keeps her at bay and the figure of that shell-shocked man, clutching a rifle and sitting behind a screen of smoke? Yet more cliché from war painting itself: on the right side of the right-hand panel, with those soldiers ready to fire, and a supplicant figure, arms open. How could one not find oneself in Spain, on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of May 1808, under Goya’s gaze? And again, with that indifferent-looking officer, slightly to the side, we are not only with Goya and in Spain, but also with Manet in Mexico at the execution of Maximilian. In the last version of the painting, Manet made the officer resemble Napoleon. Here one recognizes no one, even the ultimate denunciation disappears in indifference. And once again “cliché,” this time in the common French sense of the term – a photograph – as practiced by the two civilians on the balcony. They are taking photographs with a cell phone, as if implicitly referring to the “amateur” images of Abu Ghraib. Their shot is from above down towards a TV journalist fiddling with his camera, in another implicit allusion to the explosion of anonymous images, especially on the Internet. In other words, every war image temporally resonates with all wars past, and one is indeed very close to the “mental image” that Deleuze sought in Welles and Godard, beyond the crisis of the action-image, where images claimed to express a coherent relationship between “a context and behaviors.” Near a mental image that would no longer be “movement-image” but “time-image,” superimposing layers of pure time, and generating as much thought as sight in order to escape clichés that operate only in the present and erase all ideas beneath their dead, neutral and numbing affect.

And what would this *idea* be? Precisely the “mise en abîme” (infinite regress) of justifications of war images after the death of the hero and the great frescos meant to do him justice. One can trace at least four: **to fabricate heroes**, as Goya did, not with the fighter in action but with victims, civilians or occupied people, even local draftees working with the occupiers (and it is worth noting that there are no dead Americans in the piece, except, possibly, the corpse covered by the blanket); **to denounce**, precisely in the manner of Gardner and O’Sullivan (“*Such a picture conveys a useful moral: it shows the blank horror and reality of war, in opposition of its pageantry. Here are the Dreadful Details! Let them aid in preventing such another calamity falling upon the nation*” as stated in the caption to O’Sullivan’s picture *A Harvest of Death*), or even in the manner of Picasso or Vietnam war films (and both are present in the piece) the brutal horror of war; or in the manner of more straightforwardly militant art, **to disturb** viewers, to implicate them in the image or the scene, to “make something happen” as Auden did not say, or to break the “fourth wall” as Brecht said (and on the right side of the right-hand panel the soldiers and their victims do that twice: the first aim at

the viewer, the second implore the viewer); or finally, **to identify with the image**, to offer within the war image itself the reflection of our most intimate disasters or our strongest doubts (and one notices, all the way to the left, a somewhat western and intellectual looking man who is observing but seems not to understand; and symmetrically, to the far right, a calm man, skeptical, who seems to be holding back the supplicant as if to say “what’s the use?”) In short, the first response of *The Dreadful Details* at the apex of a long series of “mise en abîme” (infinite regress) is at the same time both a synthesis and a reversal of all of our spontaneous questions about war. After having for so long attempted to justify images through discourse, *should* we not now attempt to justify discourse through images, justify the justifications and therefore learn to once again see in images that which can no longer be heard? The piece is a form of ethical response: it is precisely where there are too many blinding images, clichés, that we must introduce an image capable of teaching us again how to see.

Deleuze’s second text on Eric Baudelaire, in chapter XI of *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* (London: Continuum, 2003, pp. 91-92), is one that attempts to show to what extent, in the struggle against clichés, painting will forever be irreplaceable by photography. In particular, he writes the following about photographs:

“They can thus lay claim to aesthetic pretensions, and compete with painting. Bacon does not believe they succeed at this, because he thinks the photograph tends to reduce sensation to a single level, and is unable to include within the sensation the difference between constitutive levels. But even if it could happen, as in Eisenstein’s cinema-images or Muybridge’s photo-images, it would only be by means of a transformation of the cliché or, as Lawrence said, by mauling the image. It would not create the kind of deformation that art produces (except in miracles like those of Eisenstein). In short, even when the photograph ceases to be merely figurative, it remains figurative as a given, as a “perceived thing” – the opposite of painting.”

By the standard established by this quotation, it is no longer a question of congruent programs, but of a challenge to be met. Yes, Eric Baudelaire’s fresco seems to promise, photography can rival painting; or at least it can rival painting on the question of war. And this, for a precise reason: because in this field, photography is undeniably preeminent visually. Painting has never succeeded in depicting war, only battles, triumphs or defeats (except, to parody Deleuze, for miracles like Goya’s). Photography alone has succeeded in capturing war for what it is: always “hors-champ” (out of field), always being prepared for or appraised after the fact, always multiple and split in its motifs (the scared soldier, the cruel soldier, the stupefied soldier, the dead, the defeated, the haggard witness), always captured in images that primed it, accompanied it, made it real, but never seized it completely, never led to its essence or “an” art (in both senses of the term). In other words, photography can, as well as, if not better than painting, express the truth not of war itself, but of our relationship to war, because it alone, both through its technical realism and its resolutely universal nature (anybody can take pictures), spontaneously expresses the radical transcendence of its experience: war cannot be truly felt by those who did not experience it, and cannot be uttered by those who did.

More precisely, Eric Baudelaire seems to take on Deleuze’s challenge in two ways. First, in adopting the precise meaning of Deleuze’s notion of cliché, which is to say that he reminds us that the true cliché that must be deformed and traversed is not the photographic “cliché” (in the sense of its French double meaning of photograph/stereotype) as with Bacon, but the indistinct switched-off image within us and outside of us. From that point on, the object is not “to bruise the images” in order to at all costs “not collapse sensation to a single level,” but on the contrary to light images up, to bring them back in their original power, to show how from the outset two levels of radically transcendent and incommunicable sensations are at play within them: the sensation of those who have experienced war in the flesh beyond any image and discourse, and the sensation of those who have experienced it only through images. From that perspective, art photography retains all of its power to deform, not in order to layer sensations, but to show us that, whatever one feels, there will always be a sensation that escapes us: that experienced by the protagonists. For example, on the right side of the right-hand panel, the soldiers of the 3<sup>rd</sup> of May 1808 and their illuminated

victims have rotated 90 degrees. It is no longer the latter that the former are aiming at, and it is no longer the former that the latter are supplicating, but the viewers. The sensation for the viewer is therefore entirely different. But has the sensation of the protagonists changed? Probably not: one sees the same gestures, the same frightful concentration of the soldiers, the same pain on the face of the victim. But perhaps it has changed: the heroic victim is no longer central and light up but off-center, darkened, and possibly mad (he is no longer in the line of fire, as another civilian seems to be reminding him). The soldiers too are no longer wearing the variegated uniforms of Napoleonic times but seem professional, homogeneous and without any affect outside of fear. One does not know, and will never know: the sensations of the real will forever vanish underneath the image.

From that perspective, one should not turn so much to Muybridge and his photographic decompositions to look for Eric Baudelaire's sources, but rather in the direction of Jeff Wall, and particularly his large 1992 fresco on the war in Afghanistan, *Dead Troops Talk (A vision after an ambush of a red army patrol near Moqor, Afghanistan, 1986)*. In that work we see dead Russian soldiers talking to each other but telling the viewer absolutely nothing. They have nothing to say to the viewer, they can only be painted. War, in its suffering and death, is unutterable. It remains silent and is forgotten under images that can only aspire towards silent tribute, frozen and anxious about their broken youth. Eric Baudelaire seems to address this very point in Jeff Wall's process: what images can reconstitute about war will never be the truth of its sensations, but only the hieratic tremor of the transcendence of that feeling, much like Byzantine icons do. Along the way, Baudelaire seems to push that logic much further; and this is his second way of taking up the challenge laid down by Deleuze. The point is to fully accept the implacably iconic nature of war images, to make art photography not only a pictorial and voodoo fantasy of reality, but a sacred space. A space that welcomes its great icons: the dead, the destruction, and the suffering as well as the inexpressible anesthesia of its protagonists. *To make icons of clichés*, in the proper sense of the term: indefinite variations on a single sacred theme, which is to say forever transcendent, forever beyond any judgment aside from a negative one that states the impossibility of feeling it and understanding it here on earth. And variations, here, charged with underlining the appalling, shared and astounding beauty of that part of humanity which survives – one knows not how – the disasters of war. What is remarkable, in this sense, is the work on the *pieta* that is alone and almost at the center of the original photograph. It is at once Michelangelo's *pieta* where the veiled woman, so small and frail compared with the other characters, seems to become the daughter of her son. But it is also the *pieta* in Guernica (on the left in Picasso's work, she moves to the right of the left-hand panel here). It is also, no doubt, the Madonna of Bentalha, by Hocine Zaourardu which was printed around the world, and again it could well refer to something else. But she is all these: sculpture, painting and photojournalistic image. All of the visual arts, from the greatest to the most common and mercenary, always revolve around the same icon which only art photography can present for what it is, an icon whose Figure will always transcend all of its visual incarnations.

With and against Deleuze, but also against a certain movement in contemporary art that disregards beauty, in the name of reality or of the "bare life," Eric Baudelaire thus reminds the viewer that war, at least, indomitably transcends all markers of reality (sensation, speech, resistance, surprise) and that that transcendence prevents one from grasping war in any other way than through the iconic semblance of beauty, through beauty of clichés elevated into icons, where those icons were attributed to war by those outside of it. In that sense, whether one sees them as testimonial, denunciation, or question, beyond fear, blindness, disgust, scandal or shame, in spite of any catharsis, pleasure or naive educational hope, war images will perhaps always force one to accept the same painful observation: the horrible but undeniable beauty and its indivisible power of both fascination and repulsion that survives, or endlessly re-emerges like an eerie obsession from ruins, rubble, corpses, victims and supplicants. Ethically and politically it is almost unbearable to have to acknowledge such beauty in war and because of war, even if it reveals itself in spite of war, and even if Eric Baudelaire is careful to leave out of field any allusion to the blind spot of genocidal wars (no reference to concentration camps here, no reference to what may be the most famous war photograph: that young child raising his arms in the Warsaw ghetto in 1943.) But here may also be the power to console and relieve, similar to that with which religious icons were once freighted. One could call it an affirmation of the sacred persistence of the human.