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Beyond all Bearing. Bespeaking the Intolerable

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## **Beyond all Bearing** *Bespeaking the Intolerable*

Arne De Winde, Sientje Maes & Bart Philipsen

What we consider as unbearable, refers in most cases and before anything else to an extreme experience or situation: an unendurable experience of physical and/or mental suffering that one undergoes, either personally or through empathetic identification, when we are confronted with the unbearable pain of others. The World Press Photo 2013 of the Swedish photographer Paul Hansen is a shocking example (Fig. 1).



*Fig. 1. Paul Hansen, Gaza Burial © Reporters SA*

Unbearable is the suffering of the Palestinian men – fathers, uncles, brothers,... – carrying two dead bodies of small children who were killed during an Israeli bomb raid, through a long and narrow alley. Behind them one sees as far as one can see a mass of lamenting and demonstrating people, almost pushing the men with the children's little bodies wrapped in white burial garments like dolls into the camera of the photographer, who is literally standing in their way. The man in front is struck with grief, he can hardly hold the body of his child, which is so close to the photographer's lens that it partly falls outside the frame, as if it becomes part of the spectator's reality and the latter is begged, summoned to help bearing the unbearable. The body language of the second man behind the first is very different: his hands grasping the body show clenched fists, his face expresses anger and indignation. What he is bearing so firmly, is intolerable for him.

The unbearable can turn into the intolerable, when the real or substitutive suffering evolves into an attitude that refuses to accept such unbearable situations; what this stance expresses is a moral indignation and the conviction that something must be done to abolish the conditions that have resulted in these unbearable and therefore intolerable events. In extreme cases – and this seems to be such a situation – indignation is close to action, violent re-action perhaps, it calls for revenge. Finding something intolerable, entails the reluctance to accept and undergo the unbearable. It expresses the will to be no

longer the victim oneself or to emancipate the victims of unbearable situations and let them become subjects of their own unbearable situation in order to abolish it. Which may as well turn into a repetition of the unbearable, i.e. the vicious circle of violence that multiplies unendurable pain. In such cases, the passivity of having to undergo and endure what cannot be endured is strangely enough replaced by another sort of passivity that looks like extreme action: when one is so flooded by unbearable emotions that one loses control over oneself and becomes an agency of pure destructive violence or homicidal mania. This seems to be the most radical response to the unbearable in its most exemplary appearance, since it suggests the transformation of an experience of utter passivity and suffering into action and change. Or rather into the never-ending reduplication of the same unbearable suffering that is passed on to those who have caused the unbearable suffering in the first place.

But why do we seemingly automatically and exclusively associate the unbearable with unendurable and intolerable suffering? Why do we think of it as something extreme, that is: as an extraordinary experience that defies and contradicts any sense of the normal and the familiar? In fact, the unbearable is as much at the center of our existence as it is at its outskirts. Unbearable would be our normality when we were not able to link it to the awareness that crossing the boundaries and transgressing into the realm of the abnormal and extraordinary is not only possible but actually also very easy. We endure our normality because we have at least the virtual, imaginative possibility to experience its opposite. Yet, this escape route out of the triviality of our daily life can turn again into an unbearable and intolerable experience, if it happens to someone who did not choose for it. The good housefather and dutiful citizen who as a result of some absurd and/or ‘unjust’ occurrences or because of the pressure of his trivial existence runs astray and becomes a madman and a criminal, has been an archetype in literature and other artistic media for a long time, from Kleist’s *Michael Kohlhaas* over R.W. Fassbinder’s *Why does Herr R. run Amok?* and Joel Schumacher’s *Falling Down* (starring Michael Douglas) to the teacher Walter White in the American television series *Breaking Bad*.

Like the Uncanny, the Unbearable is not the clear-cut, determinate negation of a ‘positive’ reality, preceding the Un-, an idyllic bearable existence that is interrupted by a sort of ‘state of exception’. One might as well argue that Being is always already marked by an unbearable dimension that a complex of political, social and cultural interventions makes bearable or livable. What we call familiar normality turns out to be the product of sometimes awkward, even unbearable biopolitical strategies and interventions; we consider them as acceptable because they presumably protect and secure this normality that we are familiar with. However, “designed to make life bearable, and to neutralize the contingencies endemic to man’s biological constitution, they yet have a more sinister aspect” – as Pieter Vermeulen argues in his contribution to this theme issue. How unbearable, unendurable and uncanny is our daily life in its bearable, steady and homely appearance, how much unbearable-ness do we accept or take for granted unthinkingly to make our lives look or feel normal and bearable? To protect us perhaps against the re-action of those who find the unbearable suffering that is inflicted upon them intolerable? Or just to protect us against the triviality, banality and contingency of our lives, of what we cherish and love as unique, irreplaceable and precious, i.e. against *the Unbearable Lightness of Being* (the title of Milan Kundera’s bestseller summarized the *Zeitgeist* of the early Eighties so well).

We hit here upon one of the many paradoxes of the unbearable: the ambivalence of the weight that is suggested by its semantic core. We think of the unbearable (and its ‘latinized’ counterpart the intolerable) as a burden or a stroke we cannot endure, a fullness we cannot contain, a weight that threatens to shatter us, a presence that overwhelms us (such as the unprotected exposure to the divine presence in many religions). But in many cases, this unbearable ‘something’ that crushes us has to do with an unendurable loss or an absence we cannot stand; it may be the almost-nothing of a precarious and fragile life that is either endangered or destroyed, and that we are or were not able to protect. Or it is – again – the unbearable lightness of being, the sheer futility and contingency of our lives.

Art cannot dissolve the aporetic dialectics of the unbearable, but it can create the space to reflect on its own aporia. And this reflection on its own aporia is perhaps itself an essential characteristic of the Unbearable. In her essay on Hans Blumenberg, Nadia Sels reflects on the paradox of the word unbearable: “we do not use it for things that literally cannot be endured [...]. What we call ‘unbearable’ are those things that, when all is said and done, we must and can bear, to our own disbelief.” The awareness of the unbearable as an intolerable situation or experience and the attempt to focus on it, to articulate, represent and communicate it, distinguishes the moment of the unbearable from itself, articulates what is itself inarticulate and beyond representation. According to Blumenberg, the symbolic mediation of what is beyond bearing offers consolation; and he refers to Georg Simmel to explain that “consolation is the strange experience which lets suffering remain but, so to speak, abolishes the suffering from suffering.” But this consolatory function often goes together with an estheticizing gesture that may intensify the unbearable instead of diminishing it. It may intensify the pain as well as the indignation *because* of its too consolatory effect that results in playing down the unbearable and intolerable and transforming it into a good story, an enjoyable piece of work, a thing of beauty.

Ever since Adorno’s famous anathema on ‘poetry after Auschwitz’, the relation between traumatic experiences like genocides and art or any other sort of representation and mediatization of unbearable and intolerable suffering has been subject to discussion. What seems to be intolerable is not only the unbearable content as such, the abject reality that is represented; it is the mediatization or representation itself that becomes intolerable, as Jacques Rancière argues in his essay “L’image intolerable”. And “[c]e déplacement de l’intolérable dans l’image à l’intolérable de l’image s’est trouvé au coeur des tensions affectant l’art politique” (94). For there is something intolerable about an image of the unbearable that can no longer be distinguished from the flux of images swamping our view of the world; intolerable is the awareness that these images *are* actually the hypermediatized reality we live in and live by: “Il n’y aurait alors plus d’intolérable réalité que l’image puisse opposer au prestige des apparences mais un seul et même flux d’images, un seul et même régime d’exhibition universelle, et c’est ce régime qui constituerait aujourd’hui l’intolérable” (ibid.). Merely looking at an image of the unbearable and intolerable, designed with the intent to arouse our ethico-political interest and indignation, may make us already guilty of trivializing the abject reality that it tries to criticize.

Yet, the unbearable that images or other artistic productions try to transmit, can still do justice to this critical intention, if the intolerable ‘of’ the image (to quote Rancière again) does not lie in its trivializing effect. Whereas this intolerable trivializing effect results from the indistinctiveness of the unbearable within the flood of images, another un-bearableness of the image may consist in its structural

resistance to neutralize or normalize the unbearable (and thus make it bearable, acceptable, tolerable) either through trivialization or sublimation (aestheticisation). In Carl Theodor Dreyer's silent film *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* for instance, the unbearable – the unredeemed suffering of Jeanne d'Arc – is 'saved' or kept in an "obtuse space" (Barthes) beyond and at the same time within its obvious narrative or visual structures, as a kind of cryptic, eccentric shadowy presence. It is withheld from the readers/spectators, and at the same time and for the same reason this deprivation unsettles the readers/spectators and casts the burden of the unbearable upon them, without allowing the consolation of a complete and alleged adequate representation. This may come close to what Rancière is calling "une autre politique du sensible" at the end of his essay on the intolerable image: "une politique fondée sur la variation de la distance, la résistance du visible et l'indécidabilité de l'effet. Les images changent notre regard et le paysage du possible si elles ne sont pas anticipées par leur sens et n'anticipent pas leurs effets. Telle pourrait être la conclusion suspensive de cette brève enquête sur l'intolérable dans les images" (114).

### ***Works Cited***

Rancière, Jacques: "L'image intolérable". *Le spectateur émanicipé*. Paris: La Fabrique éditions, 2008. 93-114.

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