

undisciplined thinking_

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The Unbearable

Still Life

Arne De Winde, Sientje Maes & Bart Philipsen

One can hardly deny that the idea of the unbearable (and its non-identical synonym ‘the intolerable’)¹ is in most cases associated with the end or the termination of life. Violent death and mutilation, slaughter or starvation: even if we think that we have become accustomed or immune to terrible images of such events, we can still be shocked by them – and, as a result of this shock, feel inclined to deny the reality or the truth of what we see so as to be able to look at them at all. We don’t believe our eyes in order to see anything at all. In the interview with the Belgian filmmaker Olivier Smolders, the latter speaks of a “blind spot” (*point aveugle*) that “occults” the real violence and, at the same time, triggers a phantasmatic scenario enabling us to imagine the unimaginable. Looking at terrible images turns into a sublime experience that jumps over the non-representable physicality and reality to reconstruct it in the mode of aesthetic virtuality. But how (un-)bearable is this aesthetics of the unbearable itself, and not just from a moral point of view? The art of the unbearable that succeeds in unsettling us as unbearable art encompasses the blind spot from which it also emerges and forces us, the spectators, to look beyond the phantasmatic veil at this uncanny setting from an oblique angle. It turns us into accomplices, even if our transgression is purely virtual, and *looks back* at us in such a way that we can hardly manage this experience, let alone transcend it with the sovereignty that distinguishes the Kantian operation of the sublime. It leaves us in a state of discomfort that one can’t shake off so easily.

Yet, a closer look at those images that we consider as representations or evocations of the unbearable or, for that matter, as unbearable images (as some images do not necessarily contain or depict terrible subjects at first sight) proves that instead of showing death as such they often represent *life*, in a perverse, precarious or deformed state though that strikes us as being more dead than alive. It confronts us with a living-on that cannot hide the fact that it survives its own imminent or already accomplished death and incorporates – if that is the right word – death in life. The unbearable character of most terrible, shocking pictures arises from a chiasm of life and death that perverts the seemingly ‘natural’ (but actually highly symbolic) logic of transition or transformation from the realm of the living to the realm of the dead. The disconcerting cross-border experience of the living dead may already have been popularized and lost its unbearable edge, as specters, vampires and zombies haunting, persecuting, infecting or killing the living, have since long turned into an inexhaustible source of popular imagination and cheap pleasure. But there are other, more discomfiting forms of transgression between life and death that do not so easily transform terrible experiences into guilty pleasure or – in a more general and neutral sense – turn the essentially unbearable fact of death and finitude into acceptance, consolation and

1. See our previous thematic issue of *Image and Narrative* on the unbearable. Arne De Winde, Sientje Maes & Bart Philipsen (ed.). *Beyond all Bearing. (Con)Figurations of the Intolerable, part 1. Image and Narrative* 14.1 (2013). Web.

aesthetic joy. The common idea of afterlife, the living on of the dead through acts of commemoration and other accepted forms of remaining within the world of the living – e.g. by passing on one’s ideas, talents, genes or goods to later generations – does not really threaten the latent clear-cut distinction between life and death that our culture clings to. But what about those images, installations or other artistic forms in which this genealogy is disrupted and twisted? Why do we first respond with rejection and even disgust to e.g. Sophie Calle’s video recording of her dying mother, the futile obsession to “capture the instance of death” and in a certain way to prevent the work of mourning that organizes the transition from life to death as well as the ‘normal’ forms of relation between the realms of the dead and the living?

Why might one be disgusted by an almost photographic picture of a dead horse head, covered with a flower and touched by a human hand, an almost emblematic setting of mourning that, however, does not seem to correspond to our idea of what can be mourned for or how one depicts objects of mourning (fig. 1). But an even more perverse and unbearable chiasm of life and death can be found in a number of artistic works of art students from LUCA – School of Arts, Campus Sint Lucas Ghent, that were shown at an exhibition during the cultural festival *Het On(ver)draaglijke* in October 2011 in Leuven (www.hetonverdraaglijke.be).²



Fig. 1. Leen Van Dorpe, Untitled (2013).

2. Our sincere thanks go to the curators of this exhibition, Carina Diepens and Wim Lambrecht. For their both artistic and organizational support, we would also like to thank Antoon Verbeeck and Ann Dieltjens (Atelier 88), and Ad van Campenhout.



Fig. 2. *Veerle Tytgat, Carpet, 50%wool – 50% human hair (2011) © Ad van Campenhout*
 Fig. 3. *Veerle Tytgat, Untitled (2011) © Ad van Campenhout*

Why are we struck by a feeling of abhorrence and repugnance when we are confronted with a collection of different sorts of human hair neatly ordered in drawers or coiled up, or with a carpet made of human hair? (fig. 2, 3) Why does its actually sensual materiality provoke pure horror, a shiver of disgust rather than a shiver of lust? Is it just the historical connotation of the *Endlösung*, the Nazi termination program for Jews, gays, mentally ill, gypsies etc. that did not only consist in the extinction by incineration, but also meant the further exploitation of the destroyed body, the usage of its remainders as soap or lampshades? Or is there perhaps a fundamental moral or humanist reflex that forbids human life to live on in such non-human and yet ‘cultural’ forms of commodities or objects of utility, even if these are linked on a very deep level with the basic needs of sheltering and clothing? We don’t really feel disgusted by the idea of living on in natural organic or non-organic forms like flowers or earth though, but the physical survival of parts of our body in objects, even (or especially?) when they are useful, appears to be a taboo. Being devoured by another living being and living on in the food chain might even be a stronger taboo, particularly when the hierarchy of eating and being eaten is turned over (think of the unbearable fate of Werner Herzog’s “Grizzly Man”. And yet, there is no idea that is more unbearable than the idea of man being eaten by another human being, as evoked by the perverse cannibalistic fantasy in Yves Petry’s novel *De Maagd Marino (Marino the Maid)*, in which a man’s voice survives through the mouth of the man who has eaten him . That is not quiet the sort of eternity one usually has in mind when one hopes to live on in one’s children, students or fellow men.

The productivity of death and the (after-)life that is generated by it, the fecundity and creativity of destruction that links death and sexuality: these are archaic motifs of religious or spiritual as well as of non-religious, materialist origin. But it has become clear that the logic of transition between forms of death and forms of (after-)life functions according to a principle of selection and exclusion as to the figures, tropes and images that are considered preferable, acceptable, forbidden and unbearable to articulate this transition. At the heart of this logic, there seems to persist a certain deep-rooted humanist

attitude, which finds it hard if not unbearable to think of and look at the human being from a perspective that does not necessarily favor forms of life and death coinciding with psychological, moral or ethical, intellectual and even aesthetic patterns. Forms of being (alive or dead) that thwart our desire for emphatic or sympathetic identification or, on the contrary, prevent us from taking a safe and secure distance from it (the Brechtian A-effect, so to say), attracting and, at the same time, repelling us, are very often forms that confront us with a formlessness and emptiness we can't really cope with. This is especially the case when this formlessness and emptiness take in their turn the (paradoxical) form of bare life and of an uncontrollable, insignificant materiality and physicality, the eruption of a life that, through its contingency, is destined to loss and decay. It is definitely our life, but it is rejected by our desire for order and structure, for necessity and meaningful destination, for continuation and conservation. And again, one may think of the rug with human hair, which seems to be the sublimely 'wrong' answer to the unbearable thought that what is 'saved' and perpetuated of a human existence, is not something that metonymically refers to his soul, but turns out to be something that even during life time is cut off and disposed of, a sign of contingency rather than infinitude.

But perhaps there still is a more unbearable form of life that does not provoke our sense of order and meaning immediately. In his shortfilm *Seuls* Olivier Smolders shows us a group of children that could be labeled as 'autistic' by a psychiatric discourse. The film refrains from such comments that might demonstrate well-meant hermeneutical sympathy and understanding. What one sees is a discomfiting and even uncanny choreography of irritatingly repetitive gestures that reject interpretation. Though these images may also break our heart, they do so not for the obvious sentimental reasons, but because they confront us with a human life that, whatever it may be, refuses, rejects any attempt at understanding, even at getting into contact. (fig. 4) In his notes on the making of the film Smolders writes: "*Vous n'êtes pas concernés par sa parole. Allez-vous en*".



Olivier Smolders, still from Seuls (1989) © Olivier Smolders

The director of the film places himself (through his camera) in between this expulsion (“Go away!”) and the (perhaps ethical) urge to be witness of their mute and incomprehensible singularity. Although those kids seem dead inside, confronting us with an almost non-human look, and refuse to partake of the symbolic order of the community, their bare life awaits a form that takes its existence at the limit of life and at the limit of what is considered as ‘human’ into account. It is still life.

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