Televisual Images of the Invisibility of War

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I.

It is perfectly clear that any discourse on the representation of war in the media must be a discourse addressing visuality, that is, the way in which the events of war are being made visible. However, the visual signatures of events in general and of wars in particular, their conditions of visibility in the media, are mostly dealt with in passing, in an oblique and indirect manner.

This may seem obvious with regard to Dayan and Katz' seminal study of media events, which takes great pains to exclude wars from its corpus. Surely, the incidents of war (if not the wars themselves) are not "preplanned, announced and advertised in advance" (Dayan and Katz 1992: 7) in the manner of "the Olympic Games, Anwar el-Sadat's journey to Jerusalem, and the funeral of John F. Kennedy" (Dayan and Katz 1992: 1), are not media events, but news events. Yet with respect to visuality, this distinction between media events on the one hand and news events on the other is void, because it solely relies on what Dayan and Katz call 'semantic' criteria. The former "preach reconciliation" (Dayan and Katz 1992: 13), whereas the latter signify disruption. 'Syntactically', though, news and media events are claimed to be similar: "If syntactics were the sole criterion, major news events would demand to be included" (Dayan and Katz 1992: 13).

For Dayan and Katz, the syntax of events in the media not only comprises the use of pictures, but is grounded in a dominance of pictures over words: "The pictures of media events, relative to their words, carry much more weight than the balance to which we are

accustomed in the nightly news, where words are far more important than pictures" (Dayan and Katz 1992: 11).[1] Therefore, the assertion of the syntactic similarity of media and news events amounts to nothing less than a conflation of their visual signatures. While different in meaning, both types of events are seen to be visually interchangeable, visibly similar.

But what, then, gives rise to the differences in meaning between news events and media events, if it is not their syntactic differentiation? From a formalist point of view, this line of argument admits of no other conclusion than that the difference lies entirely in the subject matter and not in the manner of its depiction. News events are therefore not different representations of events, but representations of different events. It all boils down to a distinction between ceremonies and accidents, between funerals and assassinations, a distinction always already existing outside of and beyond the images of those events. Contrary to that view, I would like to claim that there are forms of visualization, ways of picturing, which are peculiar to news events (as opposed to media events), and which foster their semantics of disruption.

As I said, this disregard for the visual registers of disruptive events in a study of ceremonial events can come as no real surprise. But even in a discourse such as Derrida's, which is undoubtedly about events that imply unpredictability, incalculability and exposure, the visual character of their media representations is only approached reluctantly, collaterally. In his lecture on the "impossible possibility of saying the event" (Derrida 2007), he persists in using the speech act-theoretical vocabulary of constative and performative to conceptualize the relationship of media and events. Throughout the text, showing the event in pictures is thought of as analogous to speaking of the event – a procedure that is visually uninstructive (cf. Isekenmeier 2008: 6-13). Saying the event, in pictures, might, after all, not be the same as making the event visible.

It is only in the margins of Derrida's text that the diction becomes, involuntarily and against its will, visual. In a discussion following his talk, he characterizes the secret as a

performative force pertaining to the event: “Whenever the event resists being turned into information or into a theoretical utterance, resists being known and made known, the secret is on the scene” (Derrida 2007: 456). The secret of the event, its secretiveness, that which refuses to be stated or communicated, that is, to be uttered constatively, is then described in at first tentatively, then openly visual terms: “The secret belongs to the structure of the event. Not the secret in the sense of something private, clandestine, or hidden, but the secret as that which does not appear” (Derrida 2007: 457). This seemingly paradoxical feature of the event, that it keeps its secret while not being hidden, that it is made known, that is to say, shown, without coming to appearance, will be my point of departure.

My thesis will be, that media images of war perform the contradictory task of making visible that which does not come to light, of visually depicting that which refuses to be seen. What media images of war have to capture are not public rituals that by definition call for the highest degree of visibility, but unforeseeable events that are almost invisible and conceal themselves. Effective visualizations of war, then, will be attempts to picture invisibility, to make the event visible in its invisibility. In the following, I will take a closer look at two sorts or types of images of invisibility that take a prominent place in the visual imaginary of recent wars: nightscope vision and the bomb’s eye view (cf. Isekenmeier 2009: 112-133; 148-159). In different ways, both kinds of pictures allow a glimpse at events otherwise unseen while at the same time keeping their secret. Nightscope vision renders the nightly event visible without wholly recovering it from darkness. The bomb’s eye view leaves the event unpictured, thereby indicating its presence all the more forcefully.

II.

On March 20, 2003, CBS correspondent Scott Pelley, embedded with the USMC 15th Expeditionary Unit, reports on the beginning of the Iraq War from the Iraqi-Kuwaiti border:

> All day long, American forces have been lobbing artillery shells over to the Iraqi side, but when the sun went down, the real offensive began, and it began with U.S. army helicopters flying in out of the night.
>
> Not even our nightvision camera could make out the silhouette of the attack helicopter, but its missiles lit up the sky. First, the launch … impact … and then a massive secondary explosion. Whatever the missile hit, the target appeared to be explosive itself. The chopper methodically roamed the border, taking out targets, launching … and striking. All together, we counted nine missiles on this one position.[2]

The event described obviously resists being turned into information, into a cognitive or constative utterance. Some "position", as Pelley says, is being shot at, somewhere in the south of Iraq. What is to be seen, even with the help of the nightscope camera whose pictures accompany the report, is not the helicopter initiating the attack, let alone its target, but the bursts of fire, the flashes of light brought forth by the event which are painstakingly recorded with the help of residual light amplification.

Fig.1: "Frontline Explosions", CBS, 20 March 2003

"launch" (0:27) "impact" (0:31) "secondary explosion" (0:35)

In these pictures (and the low resolution of the online video amplifies this impression), the event is turned into a visual display, a spectacle of luminosity leaving its traces without ever attaining visibility. The video records the visual imprint of the event, but barely makes it

visible. It thus performs the paradoxical operation of showing and not showing the event at the same time, thereby constituting an event which cannot be overlooked, yet never fully comes in view.

Needless to say, this kind of pictures is not to be found in media events. Rather than the eventful release of destructive energy, the "live broadcasting of history" (Dayan and Katz 1992: vii) requires the illuminated event, the event carefully put on stage, mise-en-scène. The events of war, on the other hand, need to be captured as they occur, in the desert and under cover of night. They bring forth images that produce and reproduce, that perform, the secret of the event in visual shape. With nightscope vision formatting the videos in such a way as to indicate the difficult conditions of visibility pertaining to the event, the monochromatic images of war at one and the same time provide a look at the event and indicate that only an apparatus of vision, a technical enhancement of the range of vision, does afford this look. Revealing *and* concealing, concealing the event while revealing it, these spectral images are suitable representations of eruptive not ritualistic, of news not media events.

More often than not, however, the nightly vision of events is noticed not for incorporating invisibility into its visual make-up, but for leaving unpictured the cruelty of war. Do these images not reduce the deadly violence of a bombing raid to explosions in pixels, to blasts of light modulated in green? One can discern this complaint in Derrida's lament over the victims of war: „The event that is ultimately irreducible to media appropriation and digestion is that thousands of people died. […] It's the unsayable: the dead, for example, the dead" (Derrida 2007: 460). Again, we are reminded of how unhelpful the language metaphor really is. At a crucial point concerning the appropriation of the event by the media, which must necessarily be a pictorial process, a procedure in pictures, Derrida relapses into a linguistic register and declares death unsayable, begging the question of whether it cannot be shown instead. In fact, nightscope videos *have* proven themselves able to depict injury and death, to present us with a look at the maimed and mutilated bodies of war.

On March 23, for instance, Mark Phillips relates the story of a “fierce battle for a small but important port”, as anchor Dan Rather announces:

> American and British forces around Umm Qasr, at the very south of Iraq, are still encountering pockets of stubborn resistance. It took a burst of intense fire to subdue one group of Iraqis who had been holding out in the town. Grenades were used to kill all six hold-outs, but a secondary gas tank explosion burned some of the attackers.

Within the visual parameters of night vision, that is to say, of imaging the event, the associated video does give a glimpse at the toll of war by presenting us with an incinerated American soldier in the process of being wounded, perhaps killed, in action. Due to the fact that these pictures of a “bloody firefight” (Rather) were recorded as it happened, they do so in the shape of a blazing torch, a glimmering phantom, nonetheless bearing testimony to the human cost of war in a form both memorable and impressive.

Fig. 2: “U.S. Suffers Heavy Casualties”, CBS, 23 March 2003 (1:20)

III.

The reason I dwell on the negative valuation of limited visibility is that it will be encountered again, in an aggravated manner, with regard to the other type of images I would like to discuss: images deriving from weapons systems' videos. More radically than the first type, such videos incorporate invisibility into their visual texture by attesting to the event without showing it, by making the structure of invisibility constituted by the event their organizing principle.

In its classical form, the smart-bomb video features the event in what has been called the bomb's eye view, whose heyday were the 1990s.[3] The generic sequence of pictures starts with the camera, that is the bomb, focussing on a fixed target, usually a building or a piece of military equipment. Rapidly approaching its destination up to the point of a close-up view, the video ends in white noise, in television static denoting the impact. One is instantly reminded of Derrida's talk of the verticality of the event, the surprise that "can only come from on high", which "means that the event as event, as absolute surprise, must fall on me. The event falls on me because I don't see it coming" (Derrida 2007: 451).

Naturally, the bomb's eye view is utterly unable to provide pictures of the event, to film the destruction wrought by its carrier system, which is the weapon itself. The event being so to say the blind spot of this imaging technology, critical assessments tend to blame it for obscuring rather than disclosing what happened, as does Deborah Esch:

> In the smart bomb, […] the technology of destruction and that of reproduction are coimplicated: Saturation bombing meets with saturation coverage, the latter taking us in our living rooms right up to the moment of the target's – and the image's own – dissolution. In fact, of course, this technology participates in rendering that moment – the event in question – invisible (and thus, not incidentally, a near-perfect instrument of censorship). The event is missing in action. (Esch 1999: 72-73)

But true as that may be, it does nothing to explain the fascination of these videos or the prominent place they have taken in the visual imaginary of the wars of the 1990s. How is it, then, that images of the invisibility of the event, images that render the event invisible, have become its emblem, its visual landmark? In what way and for what reason could the omission of the event, its being left out, come to be considered its representation, its visual embodiment?

In order to answer these questions, let me turn your attention to the modified form of the weapons systems video used during the war in Iraq. By 2003, the bomb's eye view proper had been completely replaced by an aerial view of bombings allowing for a number of visual variations. In one of the press conferences given by Deputy Director of Operations Vincent Brooks of the U.S. Central Command, two different forms are shown, the first of which illustrates the affinity with nightscope vision, while the second continues the business of blacking out the event.

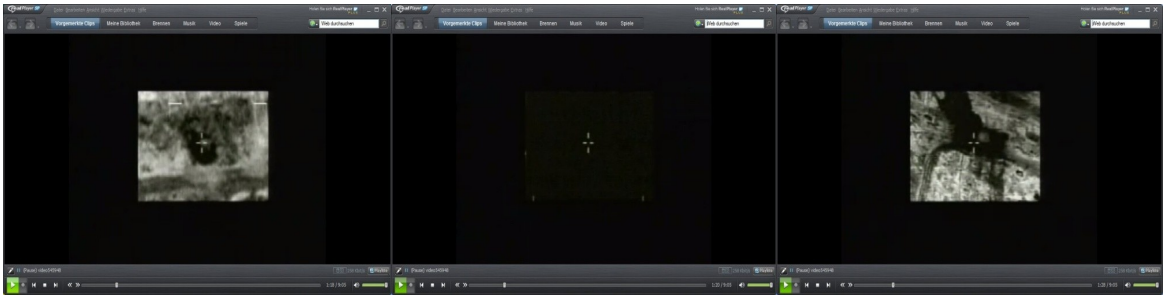
Of the first sequence, much the same could be said as about the night vision of the event. It is informationally vague, containing no hints as to where or when it was taken, not to mention the question of what was being shot at, both in intent and in reality. As before, the field of vision is optically parameterized, furnishing images on the far side of the visible spectrum, images referring to or implying poor visibility.

Fig. 3: "Images of Suspect Iraqi Sites", CBS, 25 March 2003 (1:08, 1:12, 1:16)

This first video can even be seen to go beyond nightscope vision in producing a further effect of negative visibility, a, so to speak, negative image of the event. As you can see, the eye of the event, the centre of the explosion is marked by a reversal of vision, by appearing in inverted colours such that blackness denotes the area of highest energy. The event is thus obscured, enveloped in darkness, it is precisely that which cannot be discerned and yet exists as visual effect.

The second video, on the other hand, returns to the bomb's eye view's representation of the event by picture outage. "And the explosion in this case occurs when the video goes black", remarks Brooks. In this way, failure to capture the event stands for the event, "[t]he site of destruction is aptly conveyed by the absence of signal" (White 1994: 139). In other words, the visual equivalent of what has happened is the blank screen, the degree zero of televisuality. These, then, truly are images of the invisibility of war.

Fig. 4: "Images of Suspect Iraqi Sites", CBS, 25 March 2003 (1:18, 1:20, 1:28)



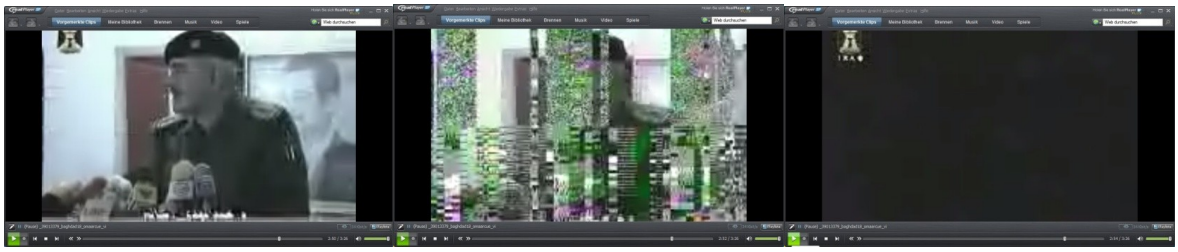
It is worth noting that all through the blackout, a crosshairs is still to be seen in or on top of the picture, whereby the impression is given that the camera, the device recording the event, is actually working fine. It can therefore be only the event that causes the screen to go black, it is the very lack of images that represents the event. Thus kept under cover, the occurrence of the event is all the more forcefully asserted – by its absence.

Whereas the classic bomb's eye view still made a determined effort to picture the event by approaching it to the utmost, its latest version gives rise to the possibility of images of war that no longer try to depict the event itself, but its structure only. The event being that which has always just happened or is on the brink of occurring, but never that which is taking place right now, the visual structure of interruption concomitant with the empty screen, the loss of the image, perfectly reproduces the nature of the event, its eventfulness.[4]

This idea of a structural realism, a pure representation of event, might help explain the status of the breakdown of broadcasts. Often associated with the assurance of liveness, the interruption of television programs actually constitutes a visual fact, and one that refers us back to the event bringing it about. During the Persian Gulf War of 1991, one of the CNN anchors might still be seen fighting against this association of event and breakdown, when Charles Jaco's report from Saudi-Arabia was suddenly interrupted: "… Charles Jaco … that doesn't mean that he is in any imminent danger – of course, we can't know that."[5]

In 2003, far from suggesting direct transmission, there are numerous reports of blackouts of Iraqi television. These videos replicating the Iraqi broadcast at the time of its obliteration can be seamlessly substituted for the air raids that caused them, denoting the event by their structure alone. A BBC report by Rageeh Omar, for instance, gives an account of an attack on Iraqi television: "Last night, Britain and the United States bombed Iraqi television. Briefly, the Iraqi authorities' control of the airwaves was halted, but it's been back on air".[6] The visualisation of this event entirely depends not on a video of the bombing itself but on pictures taken over from the target channel. Though never in view, the event is thus visually realized, indirectly and indicatively.

Fig. 5: “Baghdad Shopping Area Hit”, BBC, 26 March 2003 (2:50, 2:52, 2:54)



Interestingly enough, the logo of the obliterated station remains on screen. As with the crosshairs in the weapons’ video, there is a loss of pictures, that is, an event, inside the picture, which is the frame of the event, the visual setting in which the event unfolds.

To sum up, when looking at media images of war, for example war, we must not only count on pictures that exhibit a complex relationship of visibility and invisibility, of unveiling and cloaking. We must also expect visual forms of representing the eruptive, disruptive and interruptive character of the event in and for itself. It is in this realm of shades between showing and imaging, that we have to look for the visual signature of news events, for televisual images of the invisibility of the event.

Notes

1 Dayan and Katz distinguish between news events and nightly news, a distinction closely linked to their definition of media events as “interrupted but preplanned” (Dayan and Katz 1992: 7): “The addition of interruption excludes the evening news, while preplanned excludes major news events” (Dayan and Katz 1992: 7).

2 All CBS material quoted in this essay was taken from a CBS news video archive entitled ‘America at War’, which made available pieces of coverage broadcast during the combat phase of the Iraq War, that is, in March and April, 2003. The videos were formerly available at http://www.cbsnews.com/elements/2003/03/20/iraq/videoarchive544824.shtml. Story titles were taken from this site.

3 Michael Ignatieff prefaces his study on the "virtual war" in Kosovo with screenshots taken from one such video (Ignatieff 2000: 1).

4 The event is "an encounter between what is going to arrive and what has already arrived. Between what is on the point of arriving and what has just arrived, between what is going to come [*va venir*] and what just finished coming [*vient de venir*], between what goes and comes. But as the same" (Derrida 2000: 64).

5 'CNN Coverage: Crisis and War in the Gulf', Museum of Television and Radio (now The Paley Center for Media), New York City, Title No. 20394 (reviewed 1 October 2005).

6 To be found in the BBC News' 'War in Iraq: Day by Day Guide', http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in_depth/middle_east/2002/conflict_with_iraq/day_by_day_coverage/default.stm (accessed 1 September 2009).

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