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Archetypes of the real

Drawings by
Achim Hoops

Nothing alien can be expected here, unless it comes in the guise of intimate familiarity or as something long accustomed, which with gentle violence arranges whatever is new and ushers it as new into a world that thrives on news. Accordingly, anyone who is curious, who opens today's newspaper, who follows a correspondent's report on television or reads an article on the internet, can only be persuaded by the date of publication or broadcast that these reports truly are current news. Otherwise the colourful kaleidoscope of texts and images assailing him would also pass unchallenged as items that were news many weeks before, that had not become obsolescent in the meantime. The observer can always lay his newspaper to one side, satisfied that the reports he has just been skimming through are still the same as they always were. So essentially, nothing at all has happened. Whoever, in between times, fails to check will not miss anything, unless you count one of the myriad variations of the same.

This is lent irresistible visual force by news photographs. They certify what is deeply familiar, anchoring it in the viewer's imagination where it is made constantly available and can be constantly accessed. Politicians shaking hands or pointing nowhere in particular to manifest their strong leadership to the viewer; people in tattered clothes stumbling through the ruins of civil war obscured by billowing smoke; raging floods with the roofs of cars jutting out of the water; parched landscape, the ground cracked open in the heat; emaciated children with arms and legs too feeble to stand up; towering buildings emblazoned with huge metal logos heralding a bank or a com-

pany headquarters; men in uniform, assault weapons at the ready, taking action against protesters; brokers behind computer screens assessing and manipulating share prices; exotic beaches exuding the tropical magic aura once conjured up by Hollywood props; demonstrators massed behind flattering banners—regardless of what the news stories are reporting, these images have already made sure that the event is recognised, have already classified the occurrence to lend it authority, sense and structure. The world of news, reports, fea-

tures and stories is relentlessly enveloping its residents—readers, listeners, viewers—in this visual cocoon of all that is deeply familiar. The cocoon is not spun out of malice. It comes about on the boundary where the medium installs itself in order to transform what is unsettlingly alien into the colourful mosaic of a world image that has always felt familiar and settled, and is thus susceptible to familiarisation.

Marshall McLuhan's comment about the press is applicable to much more besides: "The first items in the press to which all men turn are the ones about which they already know. If we have witnessed some event, whether a ball game or a stock crash or a snowstorm, we turn to the report of that happening, first. Why? The answer is central to any understanding of media. Why does a child like to chatter about the events of its day, however jerkily? Why do we prefer novels and movies about familiar scenes and characters? Because for rational beings to see or recognise their experience in a new material

form is an unbought grace of life. Experience translated into a new medium literally bestows a delightful playback of earlier awareness." (McLuhan, *Understanding*

Media: The Extensions of Man, p. 211)

This, consequently, is what gives rise to the regressive nature of photo-journalism. Its medium is not what is new but what has been around for a long time, the stuff that can be tapped from earlier contents of our consciousness. So where there is a lack of supposedly topical images, "archive images" will fill the gap. They seamlessly substitute what is missing. The result is all the more para-dox. The residents of this world, that is surrounded by occurrences, shaken up and constantly reshaped by them, are running out of events. Instead they are rel-egated into a realm of what has been and locked up into

their own past. Hence, to put it precisely, readers, observers and viewers cease to be contemporaries. The images of what has been, which preside over and organise their world, are moving at even greater speed than current events. Akin to schemata that invoke their proximity to reality, they also schematise as real everything that might issue from them. But, as said before, this does not arise through malice or manipulative interests. Rather, the medium is con-stantly soliciting us to look for events in what has just

happened, of which at some immemorial time before we were once already wit-nesses or—further still—will even have been their *protagonists.* Everything is reduced to the stasis of some seeming past event, from which it issues and which it is again supposed to summon forth. Hence the statuary quality that pertains to these images, their arche-typal trait that centres every-thing, yet without having a centre of its own.

For how else should one be able to assimilate an event if not by grouping it around some past thing and threading it into mythemes, which at the same time are forced to withstand their own disappearance and therefore repeat themselves? Photo agencies generate their income not only "on the ground" but also from staged images intended to visualise the invisible nature of a structure, the abstract character of a certain con-nection, a recurring moment, some unique quality or atmosphere, or the particular mood of repeated situations. These are stored in archives furnished with models, props and standardised interiors, available as clichés to be withdrawn on demand by photo editors. They are tools for lending written or spoken accounts authenticity and emphasis. Such symbolic images, also known as icons, can be assigned effortlessly to all manner of different texts. Whether as a means of evoking the sense of security required to con-vey an all-risk insurance policy; or the pleasure

savoured by a stressed mum during a tranquil afternoon coffee break from her home-keeping chores; or the confidence carefully applied eyeliner gives her; or the logistical skills a senior member of staff displays at a business meeting; or the joy of watching children grow up, or of witnessing the closeness of a family sharing the intimacy of the garden or the pleasure of a cycling trip in the country-side; or the deep gratitude of someone responding to assistance or an act of charity that brings them relief; or the fearless power of an investment, a decision or a command—icons give visual form to structures, moods or moments. By asserting their irreducibility they are able to recall and vouch for them in constant reiteration of what is most familiar. Indeed this endows them with a quality that simulates the archetype. Whoever surrenders himself to them does not just know what he has let himself in for. More still, he is in fact allowing them to usurp him. They seductively draw him in with their allure of a price-less security grounded in a

promise whose fulfilment the images themselves already embody. As symbolic images, icons endow situa-tions with permanence, invest moments with immuta-

bility. They guarantee the viewer the security and certainty of a world.

This too is why they are not the wayward progeny or bastards of the visual messages dispatched to us by serious photojournalists from war zones, from the heart of environmental

disasters or the dazzle of official state events and national ceremonies. News photography itself derives from a world of icons, from the symbolic imagery that fills women's and men's magazines, lifestyle glossies and chemists' publications. Icons and news images share the same regimens of what has long been known, of what is most intimately familiar. The "unbought grace of life" Marshall McLuhan refers to is bestowed upon their viewers both through icons and news images. For where readers and observers initially and predominantly turn to reports about events that they personally witnessed, each event in which they had no such stake must be conveyed to them at least in such a way that the impossible fact of having been a witness is made to seem likely or at least suggestively conjured up. Only thus can they be implicated in an image, only thus can they be entrapped. As is widely known, this applies even to events of unques-

tionable singularity and uniqueness. It was no coincidence that after 9/11, one U.S. film director expressed surprised satisfaction at how closely the collapse of the Twin Towers matched what they had imagined such incidents would look like in the animation studios of disaster films made many years before. Filled with fascination, horror and nausea, audiences sat glued to their TV sets on this day, witnesses to an event that fully corroborated those familiar movie images and swathed them in the comforting assurance of being knowledgeable.

The ambivalence manifested here is inherent in the very mediatic structure from which news images transpire. Regardless of the fact that we have learnt everything we know about the world from the media, the images through which we perceive this world contain hardly any index of reality capable of reassuring us of their veracity, worldliness or reality. While, at least in its beginnings, photographic technology seemed to vouch for the authenticity of a situation that had actually spawned an image—however susceptible it was to the techniques of montage—this faith in the image as it now appears in the media has disintegrated. It was not the post hoc alteration of light-sensitive material or the technological falsification of the pixel structure of a digital image file that first allowed for the possibility of modification through which the purported pictorial reality came under suspicion of

being subtle deception. A photograph needs do no more than nudge its viewer towards suggestive associations or propose a play of the imagination to create a world of its own making. It sets itself up as the *totum* of a "reality" that has already shifted away from its own starting point. Anyhow, it no longer harbours the index of what is real simply by asserting "reality" in this way. It becomes the subject of some "objective fact", of a political incident, for instance, of a catastrophe or a newsworthy occurrence that is intended to usurp our attention. Meanwhile, what has been represented retreats at once within the photograph, while that which is real disappears in the surface of the thing that is being shown.


News images are constantly working to curb this loss by assuring viewers of the authenticity of events. With all the power of routine stagecraft they have at their disposal they seek to resist the fate that befalls every form of representation, the need to gloss over the withdrawal of reality endemic to it. Hence all techniques of

modern mythemes are deployed in an endeavour to weld together the rupture that has divided reality from photographic representation. Only thus does it become a news item. Only in this manner can photographic representation acquire its supposed presence, its reality-saturated authenticity. Which is why this authenticity does not make itself heard from an impossible distance. To become real the news item must be able to root itself in what is most familiar, which is what the viewer already is; it has to emerge from a certainty, from some place in the world where the viewer has long felt at home. This certainty persuades him that he should not so much expose himself to the images as consult them in order to devote himself to their *study.* This is what constitutes the priceless value of modern archetypes from which news photography receives its endorsement: where there is a scarcity of reality, this is substituted by the resurgence of the stereotype that brings forth something new, as if this had somehow emerged of its own accord from the timeless contents in the minds of its viewers.

But these contents are always in a fragile state. Only through forceful persuasion will photographs comply to this seamless coherence of representation. The compositional potential of the stereotype, the power of archetypal schemata, is riddled with cracks. What it lacks is a unique, singular

character, the moment of unavailability that would disturb the coherence of the *mise-en-scène* and discompose the picture. More often than not, these are utterly unremarkable moments. It might be the position of a pair of hands, the glance of the eyes, the shape of a falling shadow, a disruption of perspective, the pleat in a
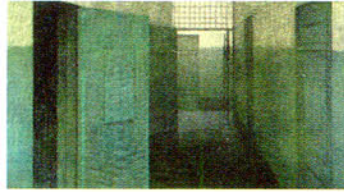
dress. Such details are striking. They pierce through the iconic surface, hitting the viewer like a shock that causes him to suspend his study of the photographic situation. For this reason, Roland Barthes insists on a second element. It "will break (or punctuate) the *studium.* This time it is not I who seek it out (as I invest the field of the *studium* with my sovereign consciousness), it is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me. [...] This second element which will disturb the *studium* I shall therefore call *punctum;* for *punctum* is also: sting, speck, cut, little hole—and also a cast of the dice. A photograph's *punctum* is that accident which *pricks* me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)." (Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida,* pp. 26–27)

The punctum acts like a shock. It rips through the coherence of the image and

its perception. It causes the eruption of a moment of reality that had previously retreated within photographic representation, only to jab out of it like inflicting a wound. Yet a stab or a cut is not a principle that could restore the coherence of a photograph. The *punctum* throws anything off balance that is willing to comply with

an incidence of reality, all the more so where reality seeks archetypal concentration.

Here one can clearly make out a conflict running through the pictorial worlds of photography, putting them at risk at every point. Indeed, the "symbolic images" or icons of the photo agencies are no more symbolic than the pictorial worlds of photo reporters who are active "on the ground", who are "real". Their archetypal power is frail, their mythical radiance fragile. All that is relentlessly reiterated within them is the insistent, imploring gesture whose purpose is to generate a perceptual space saturated with truth and reality, where viewers are transformed into contemporaries and kept "up to date". The icons thereby surge imperiously to the fore, but only to reassure the viewer of a reality he retrieves from some past condition that he already is. In the *punctum,*

however, this clamorous pretence with which the images surround the viewer simply disintegrates. And indeed, the *punctum* does not bring to light any "other" reality possibly concealed behind the ostensible one. One could not imagine, as a kind of insurance, replacing the missing coherence in a flawed foreground. Rather, this is what constitutes the power of the rupture. The small hole corrects the news images, but not by means of an alternative reality that is more authentic, truer, deeper or more comprehensive. By piercing like a stab that splits and tears apart perception, it shatters the coherence of the image as well as the arsenal of archetypes supporting the image. It signals the incisions that separate the eliminated moment of reality from the panorama erected by the imaginary pictorial worlds.

And at the same time, it interrupts the "iconic" power that the archetype seeks to appropriate in order to gain hegemony, and shreds it by means of the symbolic difference of dice, of a throw, which the world continually shares and divides.

But to do this requires us to step back a little. The battle lines of this conflict can only be perceived by those who know how to decipher the images of the latest news items as if reading what has already been there for ages. Achim Hoops's new drawings are an introduction to a reading

in this manner. They cover the innovative techniques of the photo agencies with techniques of a most traditional kind, the lines of a pen. It seems almost as if these drawings were competing with press images for the highest ratio of image resolution, given how intensely the pen loses itself in detail to produce calculated realism. Yet this bears on something other than the real. With little difficulty, in the pen's work the viewer will decipher the archetypes where the news agencies' mythemes seek to steer the viewer's perspective on the world. Thus barely a single motif among these drawings will feel unfamiliar. Rather, they disturb the viewer in his familiar, accustomed setting and surprise the stereotype of his perception that had hitherto seemed so utterly inalienable and singular.

Here the photographic medium is subjected to an analysis performed in the sensitive medium of the drawing. As if the press photo were deeply layered, Achim Hoops's works set out to skim and lay bare these layers. They probe their way through the perception of the viewer in order to grant him a sustained déjà-vu. He had always been present at the sites he is confronted with and, now, recognising himself in them renders the moment of self-encounter all the more shocking. These drawings strip the photographs of the skin, as it were, that journalistic images sheathe themselves in, turning it into the skin of the viewer. Of the world which he shares in, the viewer knows nothing that was not derived from the archetypes of the pictorial medium. In other words, he knows just about nothing. And yet it is the archetypes that allow him to remain in the world— the habit of his existence, the a *priori* of his perception and the foundation of his certainty, that are intrinsic to themselves.

This, however, divests him of his certainty of the world; and this disconnection from reality is in the literal sense of the German term *unheimlich,* uncannily unfamiliar and unsettling. By the same token, the sense of the uncanny emanating from these drawings is all the more haunting. From the very outset their subtle "realism" has lost its balance; their sombre undertone disturbs by summoning and repeating ruptures itself, as in the brief involuntary laugh let out when someone is startled by a sudden flash of insight. It is uncanny, for example, when something that had previously been discarded returns in the guise of some presumed reality in order to cloak the

act of rejection. While this gives relevance to the comment by Marshall McLuhan that "for rational beings to see or recognise their experience in a new material form is an unbought grace of life", it could also be forgotten that this grace nonetheless remains marked by the uncanny. The garb of "new material form" cloaks its wearer just as much as it exposes him and deprives him of his worldliness. Yet this only further intensifies the graphic analysis of news photography advanced by Hoops's drawings. Their archetype fails to consolidate as it is supposed to, and the mytheme fails to integrate what it seeks to contain. In the uncanny, unfamiliar nature of the revenant, the one persistently rebellious aspect is the one that cannot be pacified because it keeps coming back.

So in these terms, this is also not about countering the archetypes of the real world with something that drawing as a medium voices as truth. The way the conflict courses through the pictorial worlds of photographs is no different from the one traversing artistic composition. But this is severed by Achim Hoops's drawings, which endows them with analytical power. What Barthes called a *punctum,* which strikes the viewer like a stab and saves him from making himself too comfortable, too much at home in the images, pierces all the more painfully when the cut is executed with the meticulous precision of a pencil. □