

Traces of the past: Alternative forms of repair in visual culture and public memory*

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Abstract. This paper will investigate the crucial role played by images in the public arena as conveyers of meanings and social relations. Visuality, as a cultural and social practice in which meanings are constructed and negotiated, will be explored as a primary medium of the intersubjective transmission of trauma that involves both the artist's perspective and the viewer's reception. Several contemporary art productions emerging from a context of diaspora and cultural hybridity speak of a past that cannot be forgotten and wounds that cannot be fully healed, but still demand recognition or an alternative form of "repair". An act of repair invokes a creative ethics and a potential for transformation, in an open-ended process of change that also brings to the fore concerns over the tensions between memory and representation, particularly when they relate to experiences of communal trauma.

Keywords: Photography, Public Memory, Traumatic Past, Reconciliation.

1. Preliminary remarks

This paper investigates the crucial role played by images in the public arena as conveyers of meanings and social relations. Photography, in particular, as a concrete material medium of memory, in regard to a family history as well as to the processes of public commemoration, is extremely relevant for individual, collective, and public memories. How can photography function as a tool of memory and how does it work? How can we influence the representation of a biographical story of a family or the public representation of a traumatic past through a picture? Photography has several sociological, ethical, and political implications that should be taken into account. Our contribution refers to the connection between photography and memory, with a particular focus on the images associated to traumatic events. Our theoretical questions address the nature, the role, and the function of the photographic representation of a traumatic event: a picture is considered as a "condenser", a container of a particular part of the reality. Even if an image depicts a portion, the all-encompassing impact on the spectator is unquestionable. This effect is the power of the iconic sign, which makes the spectator forget that a photo is just a photo, as critical theory has demonstrated.

Referring to a theoretical corpus that highlights the role and the efficacy of images in the transgenerational transmission of the past, this paper contributes to this debate through the exploration of contemporary visual examples that, emerging from a context of diaspora and cultural hybridity, speak of a traumatic past that cannot be forgotten and wounds that cannot be fully healed, but still demand recognition. What visibility brings to the fore, in our view, is an investigation on an alternative form of "repair", an act that opens the archive and disseminates its scattered pieces in the present.

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2. “Just a photo”

An interesting take on the visual representation of the past regards the difference between images and words in their capacity to transmit messages and meanings. Which are the different forms of narration when images, rather than words, are used? We know that all images are polysemous, as Roland Barthes has demonstrated, in other words a multiplicity of meanings coexists within one image, of which the viewer can choose some instead of others (1964). As a result, the linguistic message is one of the techniques used to fix the image, to function as an “anchorage” of all the possible meanings of the photograph, and to direct the reader. Nevertheless, the elucidation of the language is selective, applied only to certain signs of the iconic message, to convey ideological values.

In *Camera Lucida* Barthes further develops his intuitions about the crucial role played by the viewer in making sense of the image, suggesting two modalities of experiencing photography: *studium* and *punctum* (1980). The former is a form of rationalized and distanced knowledge, a sort of interest and general curiosity engendered by the actions, the facts, or the faces represented in the image, while the latter is an “accident”, a puncture, an arrow, something in the photograph that affects the viewer and hurts her/him. Something happens when a detail in the photograph opens a wound, a trauma, or a fissure that, regardless of the photographer’s intentions, strikes the viewer in an unexpected and powerful way.

Recalling Barthes’ analysis, Nicholas Mirzoeff comments that the most important and unknowable singularity of the photograph is this capacity to open a *punctum* as a means to connect memory and the realm of the dead (1999). This power of photography provokes the viewer’s production of unexpected and unintended meanings. Moreover, Mirzoeff defines the visual as an interdisciplinary and challenging place of social interaction and definition in terms of class, gender, sexual and racialised identities, where meanings are created and contested. Visuality is thus developed as a problematic place, in which subjects, are defined both as agents of sight and as objects of a visual discourse. The theoretical tools of visual culture reveal the frictions that constitute a visual regime and make it possible to investigate vision in its social and cultural dimension. Considered as a field of study, visibility is concerned with the social activities of looking and seeing; it considers the image as a sign or text that produces meaning (Hall and Evans 1999). Furthermore, since these meanings cannot be completed within the text, they require the subjective capacities of the viewer to make the images signify. This leads to a theory of visibility according to which images, more than written texts, offer themselves to be read as “natural”, because they have a more direct relationship with the reality they represent. Because of this, an image is more successful in transmitting the ideological meaning than a written text, as we know from Stuart Hall’s famous work “Encoding, Decoding” (1993 [1980]). This is the reason why the viewer will probably forget that the photo is not the reality, but “just a photo”.

Hall’s argument still convinces today and seems connected to a more recent study by Karin Knorr-Cetina, who proposes a visual approach based on a kind of “viscourse”, rather than discourse, to highlight the prevailing, communicative, and experimental role of pictures in several arenas (2001). Focusing on high-energy physics, Knorr-Cetina stresses the superior capacity and the inherent power of the images to function as evidence, since a pictorial representation is indispensable in demonstrating specific formations. This is particularly clear and theoretically consistent if we consider the crucial role played by photography as a representation of the past, or as a visual narration of what has happened, eventually engendering a process of remembrance and recollection.

A photo is an objective reality, but it does not objectively represent a reality. More precisely, it simultaneously expresses subjective and objective positions. The opinion according to which an image represents an event, whose meaning depends both on the photographer’s subjective perspective and on the observer’s subjective reception is very common among sociologists and

communication scientists (Barthes 1964; Zelizer 2004; Eberle 2004; Sontag 2008; Shevchenko 2014). This epistemological perspective on the role of the visual versus the depicted reality is particularly useful when considered in relation to the processes of remembering and forgetting, as Shevchenko (2015) emphasizes. Since Halbwachs (1925; 1941) the theoretical investigations and the empirical research on memory have known an important development (Nora 1984; Connerton 1989; Middleton & Edwards 1990). The different individual, collective, and social forms of memory are more and more analyzed as a work in progress, influenced by the present, which makes the objective rendering very problematic, as Maurice Halbwachs has proposed (1968). Therefore, the past is not a static object, but a dynamic construction, whose public narration is formed by several individuals, social groups, communities, institutions, and factors.

3. The photo as a synecdoche

The correlation between photography and memory allows us to view both areas from a theoretically coherent perspective: both photography and memory can be interpreted as social activities whose meanings are deeply linked to the subjectivity of individuals. Similar to a photographer who has to decide what s/he wants to shoot (and this decision always implies a drastic reduction), a person's act of remembering is always very selective. This selectivity is deeply linked to the epistemological status of photography and memory. As Homi Bhabha suggests, the past cannot be separated from the present; the former is not a mere predecessor of the latter (1994). On the contrary, the past presents itself as a contingent, interstitial and "intermediate" space that intervenes in the present, bringing newness with it. What is crucial is that remembering cannot be a quiet and introspective recollection, but it is an act of putting together the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present.

Very interestingly, the partiality of the selection engendered by photography and memory leads to the confusion of a part for the whole. The trope that indicates this semiotic phenomenon is "synecdoche" (from the ancient Greek "συνεκδοχή"). Both photography and memory are in a relation to the reality that could be described as a synecdoche: although they just represent a part, they are implicitly perceived as the whole. This is their potential in conveying an ideological content: if this "empty" space can be hidden between a part and the whole, then a particular perspective can be transmitted as a universal one. In other words, this gap allows the elaboration of a "cultural hegemony", which refers to the specific cultural aspect of a struggle over legitimacy (Gramsci 2014 [1948-1951]). Filling the gap with an ideological, ethical, and political content carries a specific meaning in case of personal or communal trauma. Actually, the manipulation of the narration of individual or collective violence has ethical and political implications, which are more important than the representation of a normal event of life.

4. The visual representation of trauma

A consolidated tradition in Memory Studies addresses questions about the role of visual memory in representing trauma and war atrocity, stemming from Walter Benjamin's invitation to reflect on the images of public events as a guide for the future. Benjamin's angel of history embodies a critical observer: with his face turned toward the past, struck with silence in the face of the world destruction, he would like to stay and recompose the catastrophe, but a storm propels him into the future, while his gaze remains directed toward the past (Benjamin, 1940). Departing from the evocative suggestion of the German philosopher, as well as from Susan Sontag's recalling of the atrocity photos to link past and present, Barbie Zelizer examines how haunting visual memories of the Holocaust were produced by the photographic coverage of the World War II Nazi concentration

camps (2000). These memories act as a permanent reference point of the Western imagination and as an iconic representation of human evil. The photographs of the liberation of the concentration camps were used for the journalistic record and created collective memories about these atrocities. More powerfully than the narratives describing the camps, the flood of photographs was presented with few identifying characteristics and succeeded where words did not, turning collective disbelief into the horror of recognition.

As for the ethical implications of a visual rendering of traumatic events in the public discourse, Andrea Liss (1998) has reconsidered the demand to bear witness, not to discredit photographs, but to rethink the ways they give a realistic evidence of the events and to analyze the role of the representation strategies in relation to the Holocaust. What happens when photos are used as lessons of history for future generations? Liss suggests that a reevaluation of how the Holocaust is represented through the photographic representation is particularly pertinent and very problematic: beyond the voices of direct witnesses, the difficulty is not only about the appropriate form that representation should take, but also about the issue of legitimacy (who can legitimately recount the events), the use of photography as historical proof, and the translation of traumatic memory into "postmemories". However, to adhere to the prohibition of speaking for the events beyond the voices of direct witnesses would mean to leave these events silent. As Liss suggests, the inauthenticity of the postevents' speaker is inevitable, indeed necessary, for memories to be part of the public discourse. From different perspectives, Zelizer and Liss analyze the use of traumatic images in the public arena and investigate their ethical and political implications. In a transformative perspective, the photo of a traumatic event acts both as a conveyer of collective suffering and as an opportunity to elaborate a collective trauma.

5. Family/collective memories

Images play an especially significant role in narrating multiple versions of the past. How does an image function as a medium of family memories? Elevated to an object worthy of academic scrutiny, the family album constitutes a simultaneous cultural production and cultural criticism, because personal remembrance is necessarily intertwined with the collective narrations of the past. According to Martha Langford, a photographic album is a repository of memory and an instrument of social performance, characterized by a collective compilation, rather than individual authorship (2001). As a way of constructing multiple versions of the past, the album is a cultural artifact that also offers a model for how we might analyze our connection to the past. This relation is undoubtedly characterized by gaps, breaks, and puzzles, which avoid a linear reading of the content. Combining photography with orality, Langford demonstrates how we can remember through albums and dispose our stories in the future.

As already said, the nature of the photographic representation can be described as a synecdoche; thanks to this specific quality, a photo can function as a possibility of a deep transformation of the past. Since a photo can be confused with the reality, its representational function becomes very strong. Alternatively, it can be considered as a bridge, where the past and the present meet and reflect each other. When Halbwachs argues that memory is accomplished via a shared consciousness that forges it to the agendas of the present, he precisely refers to this transformative capacity of memory.

A photo from the family album can be a chance to narrate a story, to interrupt the linearity of time, and to lead us to a time of immanence, where different narrations coexist and insist on the present. Through the exercise of memory, it is possible to discover the past and elaborate it differently, eventually engendering processes of healing (Tota, 2014). The leading British artist and cultural theorist Keith Piper, born to a family of African-Caribbean descent, develops his interests in photography and archiving strategies in his artistic practice (1997). During a residency within the

walls of Birmingham Central Library, he produces the visual project *Ghosting the Archive* (2005). In 1990 this institution acquired a large collection of more than ten thousand images, mostly unidentified, both proof prints and negatives, from the studios of Ernest Dyché (1887-1973), a commercial portrait photographer who operated in the suburbs of the inner area of Birmingham and had taken family portraits of many members of the communities of migrants arriving from the Indian subcontinent, African countries and Caribbean islands from the 1950s to 1970s (Campt, 2012). Piper physically opened the boxes of Birmingham City Archive and found countless portraits of families without names or other identifying elements; crucially, among the photos of the collection, he found photographs of his own parents' wedding celebration in 1957.

During the residency Piper decides to focus on the negatives, which laid unquestioned and anonymous since they were taken: held by the artist in a white-gloved hand, these fragile cultural conveyers of memories are reframed one after the other in the contemporary space of Birmingham City Archive by Piper's digital camera for the video *Ghosting the Archive*. A shutter click presents each time a different negative plate that, through technology, slowly morphs into its positive version and makes countless individuals appear. Family members, women with newly born children, men seated on the chairs provided at Dyché Studio, wearing work uniforms, new or borrowed coats, emerge from obscurity and have the possibility to reappear as a ghostly presence.

The negatives of the huge photographic collection opened by Piper do not allow the viewer to look for physical attributes, essential or authentic evidence. Rather, they ask the observer to engage in a reconstruction work and a critical confrontation with the multiple cultural formations and historical experiences of migration, in which individual as well as collective memories emerge. The past emerged from Piper's family history and from the scattered pieces of other migrants' family albums necessarily intertwines with a collective history that, in this case, is the history of Europe, of the diasporic formations that constitute the European space, and of the impossibility of "going back".

6. The album of the evicted

The focus on visuality, on photography in particular, represents a deliberate choice of this article and a strategy to provide useful insights into the relation with the past. The distance between the shutter click and the final view of the image interrupts linearity and involves us, the viewers, in a more direct way, as if we were there, in the moment of the shoot. The dead represented in the photographs that constitute the Dyché Collection are not dead, because their lives leave traces that allow us to reconfigure the present. In this sense, photography draws us in a conversation with the dead, an action that opens the wounds of traumatic events. This dialogue still demands recognition and new tools, not only to make sense of the past and the present, but also to understand the processes of imagination.

In her quest to address her own relation to South African history, Siona O'Connell turns to images from her family albums: a photo of the wedding of her paternal grandparents, the other of her parents' wedding, married at the same church in Cape Town. As she stresses, the photograph connects memories and histories in a real way, conveying meanings that are embedded in concrete social, political, and economic contexts (2018). In particular, the family album exceeds autobiographical or personal memories, and yet helps to preserve them in the obligation to remember. More than two-dimensional objects, because of the material place they occupy, photographs propose an anchorage of imagination. Therefore, the two prints O'Connell finds in her family album - the first one depicting her father as a kid outside the church at her grandfather's second wedding, the second with her father appearing as a young bridegroom - say little or nothing of a trauma to come. Indeed, a short and unexpected notice would have changed these people's life forever: Cape Town, the "Mother City", shaped by histories of colonialism, regulation, and

displacement, saw the apartheid legislated forced removals and evictions of District Six and other areas of the city that begun in the 1960's and continued until the 1980's, resulting in the displacement of about sixty thousand people only in District Six for the arrival of new, white residents. O'Connell recalls that in the years 1960-1982 about three and a half million black people were subjected to several forced removals as a result of the apartheid segregation regime that was legislated in 1948. Forced to leave areas such as District Six, Constantia, and Harfield Village, millions of people moved to new "coloured" townships with cruel and ironic names such as Atlantis and Ocean View, which were everything but pleasant places to live and to raise children. Families were separated from other relatives and from their neighbors, and forced to live in inhospitable places such as Atlantis, situated sixty kilometers from the city center, without public transportation. The cruelty of the eviction notice, which came totally unexpected and knocked on families' doors, destroyed any basic notion of the sense of community and neighborhood.

The narratives of the home-owners evicted from District Six, together with the stories of the people who passed away in the meantime, are becoming pale, like the surface of the black and white photographs of O'Connell's family album, in which she tries to perform an imagined homecoming following her relatives' pathways. The memory that seems to fade is actually still alive and powerfully resonates with the actual social and economic conditions of the new South African society, where everything evokes the sound of the bulldozer during the forced removals. Therefore, how can we situate ourselves in a history that we have not experienced? How can we engage with old photographs, knowing that they are pieces of a larger memory?

7. Impossible returns

The documentary *An Impossible Return* (2015) investigates the oppression caused by the forced evictions in South Africa, through an oral and visual archive that allows new elaborations of social justice after oppression. Starting with intimate photographs of family life as a way of operating outside of mainstream regimes of knowledge, the film stresses the lived experiences of black families and their struggle for self-representation. While doing research for this film, the director O'Connell had several conversations with ex-residents of District Six, all of whom were her parents' neighbors and then evicted. After the unavoidable sadness of meeting each other after forty years and many relatives and friends left behind, these people were invited to bring photographs with them: pieces of history, contained in plastic bags, were passed around with great care. Grainy pictures depicting moments of life in the area of District Six appeared as the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, whose edges could not be connected. After speaking about the progress of the land-claims process, the photographs suddenly brought this people back to a trauma that was not resolved, but yet still alive and clearly recognizable. In these collective conversations, O'Connell understands that much is yet to be elaborated, because, as her father commented, these people always seem to be afraid of something, even if they are not sure of the demons that keep haunting them. In addition, the amount offered by the Land Restitution process is insignificant, compared to the injuries caused by apartheid, of which some remain silenced in the work for reconciliation, including forced removals and racialised distributions of wealth and poverty. This has produced citizens who still have to understand what happened to them and what is at stake for the project of social justice and an alternative future.

The struggle for democracy and justice needs to be imagined with a work on the past: as O'Connell reminds us, the power exerted by apartheid, as a consequence of slavery in Africa, produced a non-human oppressed subject, whose future had to be totally re-shaped and re-invented. Even when this subject is free, s/he keeps living in an immanent state of fear and has to come to terms with her/his past. Many evictees have never accepted to return to their homes in District Six, to a place where their oppression was inscribed. "There's no going back", as one former resident

affirms. The impossibility of their return represents a clear request of recognition, the acknowledgement of a trauma that cannot be healed with the post-apartheid apparatus of remembering and forgetting, carried on by museums and institutionalized archives. What apartheid did, according to O'Connell, is making these people unable of comprehending their sorrow and loss: the lack of names on the headstones in District Six has not permitted an official recognition of this suffering as part of a larger narrative of nation-building. The ex-evictees have been left alone and have come to terms with the dead on their own, often looking at a photograph taken from a plastic bag and passed around, following the invitation of a former neighbor's daughter who has to do research for her new documentary on impossible returns. These photographs lead to a journey in the lives of these oppressed people and bear witness to a traumatic past that is not over, but still persists in the present.

8. An alternative repair

We have demonstrated that photography can be described as a synecdoche and function as a possibility of a deep transformation of the past, or as a bridge, where the past and the present meet and engage with each other. The faded photographs that emerge from personal archives speak, many years later, of a desire to break the undisputed authority of the archive. Since no existing archive can preserve the totality of history, we are always confronted by a selection, an assemblage of pieces that are put together in an illusion of coherence. In *L'archéologie du savoir* Michel Foucault states that the archive is neither an accumulation of documents nor a complex of institutions: it cannot be defined in its totality, but only in fragments and levels that reveal why so many realities are hidden (1969). Consequently, how can we re-imagine the paralyzing pattern of the archive to include unauthorized voices? How can the legitimizing force of the archive be diverted from the preservation of only certain memories? The images that have been preserved by millions of South African who were forcibly removed, as well as Black British migrants' photographs silently included in the Dyche Collection, bring history into focus and present a parallel history that still asks for recognition. The photographs of the oppressed or marginalized subjects of history bring us to an immanent time: in the here and the now the past forces us to remember and to find new ways to come to terms with a personal and collective traumatic past that is far from resolved.

Silenced memories give evidence of the trauma of the past and its persistent existence in the present. We cannot imagine the future regardless of our history, even if we know that it is impossible to return to an original condition. What is crucial is that, in the tension between memory and representation, images can offer new tools for the repair of a controversial past. For the new South African generations of ex-evictees, photographs can become a chance for an act of repair, which speaks of wounds that cannot be healed, but still demand recognition.

9. Towards an arts sociology of repair

We are aware that the term "repair" covers a multitude of synonyms and differences, of which some pursue the avenues of renovation and replacement. This point addresses the implication of repair in relation to human body, in the context of illness and disease. As Nadine Ehlers has recently articulated in relation to post-mastectomy breast reconstruction surgical interventions, repair in relation to human body, to the female body in particular, can be considered both as a normalizing procedure and as a promise to return to a supposed state of wholeness (2018). Nevertheless, the problematic issue of the "precarity of repair" raises questions about unexpected forms of renewal. In the context of recovery, the vulnerable human bodies are not only fixed, but

they also experience new ways of continual becoming and alternative modalities of inhabiting the world.

Wounds and representations of suffering are not limited to the corporeality of the body. Yet the recognition of the implications of repair also concerns the social body, the narration of collective trauma that intersects with the overlapping and intertwined histories common to different people and social groups. In this article we propose a theoretical approach to repair that could investigate complex social formations, expanding upon the ethnomethodological conception of the term. As we know from Harold Garfinkel (1967), repair can be a way to describe the intersubjective maintenance of social order in everyday conversations and to study how people respond and restore mutual understanding. In “The Mechanics of Workplace Order: Toward a Sociology of Repair”, Christopher Henke (2000) imagines a sociology of repair that expands the ethnomethodological use of the term and applies it to a more general study of social order, to investigate the material and social forms in the workplace, in other words the negotiations of ideas and behaviors that allow workers to do their job. This point calls attention to a broader meaning of repair, which not only applies to objects and material things, but also to intangible forms such as communities, cultures, and memories.

Hence, differently from a static form that creates both distance and proximity with the past, as in the psychoanalytical approach to repair, in our sociological take on repair we wish to draw the attention on the on-going and unpredictable fractures of social order. In this sense, repair becomes a useful way to think about an unlimited range of human experiences, in a constant tension between the drive for restoration and the acknowledgement of on-going forms of reparation. In an open-ended process of change that also brings to the fore concerns over the tensions between memory and representation, an act of repair invokes a creative potential for transformation, particularly when the remaking relates to experiences of communal trauma. Here, we wish to turn to the efficacy of photography in addressing these issues and to raise a more general point of the sociology of arts, which examines how artistic forms emerge as meaningful within interactions and have an impact on questions on memory and trauma. In our view, this places the sociology of the arts on the forefront of the study of culture, in the engagement of art with other human variables, providing the framework for the investigation of more general cultural mutations.

Our analysis concerns the provocative work of the Berlin-based French-Algerian artist Kader Attia, who helps us to focus on the bodies damaged by wars and conflicts and on the attempts of healing those open wounds. His work has been exhibited at the Venice Biennale, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, the Whitechapel Gallery in London, dOCUMENTA(13) in Kassel, as well as at MoMA and The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, Tate Modern in London, and Centre Pompidou in Paris, just to name a few. The multicultural vision of his work is rooted in his own heterogeneous life experiences: the inter-cultural conflicts of his childhood, like the years spent in Congo and Algeria. Born in 1970 in France to a family of Muslim immigrants from Algeria, Attia grew up in the multicultural atmosphere of the suburbs of Paris, in a context where Muslim and Jewish immigrants lived side by side in relative harmony. In his early works Attia focuses on the implications of demographic changes in France and on the encounter between different religious practices. In a kind of proximity with Jewish spirituality, Attia produces *Big Bang*, a significant work for the interior courtyard of the Jewish Museum in Paris, then re-presented as a smaller installation in 2007 at Haifa Museum of Art. In this work the symbols of Judaism and Islam - the Star of David and the crescent – are condensed into a monumental sculpture, a large ball or a meteorite that expresses Attia's concern with the tension between religious traditions and social conflicts.

In his 2010 exhibition *Holy Land*, at Galleria Continua in San Gimignano, Italy, Attia placed twenty-one tombstone-shaped mirrors along the Tuscan countryside, as if simulating the arrangement of the tombstones in a cemetery. These mirrors create a complex web of meanings and reflections that do not help us but rather force us to think of questions such as invisibility and absence, disappearance and erasure. In presenting *Holy Land* on a beach of Fuerteventura (Canary

Islands), where thousands of African “illegal” immigrants land in the promise of a better life or, more often, perish during a very precarious journey, Attia forces us to think about our own history and about our responsibility. Furthermore, through absence, the mirrors reproduce a reminder of collective suffering and communal trauma. Following David Meghnagi’s intuitions, we could say that Attia’s intervention is part of a process of re-elaboration of a collective trauma that tries to re-compose the fragmented pieces and the violent fractures of tragic life experiences for future generations. Through artistic practices such as *Big Bang* and *Holy Land* we are invited to fill the voids in the process of re-signification of traumatic events. In a conversation with controversial pasts and experiences of resilience, the living ones constantly engage with the dead and confront with their own responsibilities.

In works such as *Open Your Eyes* (2010), *The Repair* (2012), and *Untitled (Work on Memory I)* (2017) Attia juxtaposes images of French soldiers wounded in World War I with repaired objects taken from colonial-era Africa that were considered unsuitable for display in Western museums. His argumentation starts in Congo in the 1990’s, when he saw for the first time an old and delicate fabric made of raffia, which had been repaired with small pieces of a colonial French fabric applied on the holes. Then, he discovers that many objects, such as bowls and masks, had been repaired in their African local contexts with old buttons, pieces of old fabrics, and mirrors. However, these objects have been kept aside in the collections of Western museums of African art, maybe because they belong to an aesthetic code that the Occident cannot decipher (Attia, 2018). Even if some repaired objects are occasionally displayed in Western ethnological museums, the institutional discourse never takes their repair into account, despite the fact that examples of repair can be found among many African ethnic groups in Congo, Tanzania, and Cameroon. Do these objects reveal an alternative aesthetics in the non-Occidental world?

Attia establishes a resonance among African and European histories of repair via a common experience of trauma. When thousands of African masks and other objects were brought to Europe, this continent was experiencing one of the most traumatic moments of its history. During and after the First World War, indeed, millions of wounded soldiers returned home with their faces seriously injured or repaired with early plastic surgery interventions. In the artistic/research project *The Repair from Occident to Extra-Occidental Cultures*, shown at Documenta 13, Attia juxtaposes a series of different objects from some ex-colonized African countries, taken from private archives, with a slide show of the so-called *gueules cassées* (broken faces), the Veterans of the Great War, thus called for their evident signs of surgery on their faces. These soldiers, recruited both in Europe and in the colonies, were concrete reminders and testimonies of the brutality of war, but were given little social visibility or historical recognition. In France, for example, they were assigned by the government a house 40 kilometers from Paris and often excluded from the public commemoration of the Great War (Ianniciello, 2018). Their status as damaged survivors made them walking reminders of an open wound and unrepaired trauma.

In this way, Attia reminds us that archives are always sites of selection and exclusion and brings us into a decomposed and alternative archive, which is not a monument of the past, but an aspiration for alternative futures and ethico-aesthetic forms of repair. The disturbing photographs of the “broken faces” of the war, marginalized in the public memory of the conflict, ask for a dynamic process of repair and revision. These disturbing faces, emerged from a scattered archive prepared by the artist, strike the viewers in a powerful way. Next to repaired object, collected for the exhibition in Kassel, the photographs of the damaged bodies of the combatants are there, all looking for repair. If we persist in looking at the soldiers’ pictures, we envision a relation between the damaged bodies and the process of memory: these images ask for an alternative elaboration of a collective suffering and, within an art context, offer us the opportunity to acknowledge a controversial past whose consequences are still here. In this perspective, we claim that the photographs of a traumatic event can act as a concrete reminder of a collective sorrow, but also as an opportunity to transform a controversial past, operating outside its institutionalized versions.

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