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Aesthetics, Authenticity and the Spectacle of the Real: How Do We Educate the Visual World We Live in Today?

Kirsten Adkins

Abstract

In his analysis of the twentieth century, the philosopher Alain Badiou defined a 'passion for the real' in terms of spectacle, in its extreme violence, disseminated through art or cultural media, that would shake us out of a complacency we might call reality. But how do we teach Badiou's 'real' in the technological world we live in today? We now have continual access to the 'spectacle' of the real uploaded within moments of it happening. Photography, video and consumer journalism become a dominating force in our visual experience of the world. In the face of this, how might we consider our relationship with the image, its aesthetic and authenticity? What role does art education play in promoting a critical dialogue with representations of today's real?

Keywords

the real, representation, performativity, subtraction, spectacle

A man stands on a busy south London street holding a cleaver in bloodied hands. Another man lies bleeding in the road. The event is captured through a mobile phone and uploaded onto the Internet.

Introduction

Our visual world has changed, driven less perhaps by our physical environment and more by a virtual one: images of pornography, or extreme violence, representations of war or human suffering. We may be preoccupied with the visual narcissism of social media or all those cute cats. It is a visual world that is ubiquitous and relentless. In this way technology, more than ever before, forces us to rethink our notion of authorship, its aesthetic and its authenticity (Benjamin 1936; Barthes 1977). We sift and select, making sense out of the millions of images which are uploaded on to the Internet every second of every minute of every day. Some images are easy to avoid. Some cannot be ignored. The visual agenda has changed, but how is it changing the learning environment?

This article is concerned with news imagery in the face of rapidly changing global communications. It focuses specifically on violent, graphic and disturbing news images. These images are placed in the public domain. They destabilise our view of the world. They offer up new realities. They are images which promote a physical reaction. They cause us to shudder. We catch our breath. Our visual experience is continually moving, shaped and reshaped by an increased access to a violent aesthetic representing 'real life' events. Through such imagery, I want to discuss the complexities of a relationship between the kind of imagery we experience or feel and the imagery that I teach.

How do we educate the visual world we live in today?

My enquiry started on a particular day in May 2013 when I was confronted with two very different pictures from very different contexts, but with a connecting theme relating to bloody murder and decapitation. The first image related to the killing of Private Lee Rigby in Woolwich. I saw it that morning through the news, firstly on television, then on newspaper stands and later on YouTube. It was an image which most of us would have worked hard to filter out of our consciousness. It was shocking and violent, brutal and tragic, and I could not take my eyes off it.

On the same day I was teaching an art lesson in which 14-year-old students were analysing the image of *Judith Beheading Holofernes* by Carravaggio. The painting represents the biblical narrative in which Judith saves the people of Israel by means of seduction and then decapitation. My students and I viewed the Caravaggio picture dispassionately. We looked at it in terms of formal elements, to deconstruct its representational meaning and aesthetic.

But it was the collision of these two images which caused me to consider what I saw as a mismatch between the visual world that I inhabit and the imagery that I teach. The experience caused me to question my own limitations as an art teacher in the secondary school context. These limitations emerge from a received teaching practice, grounded in a representational model, through which I contextualise work for students. This article sets out to consider ways in which contemporary imagery might be discussed, not in terms of what it represents, but the means through which it has been disseminated and subsequently the way it behaves. In this way the article discusses the contemporary image in its performative sense. The article does not offer a solution, but looks to Atkinson, Bolt, Deleuze and Badiou as a way forward in negotiating issues of education, representation and a new real.

The killing of Private Lee Rigby: a constructed real

'I apologise that women had to witness this today, but in our lands women have to see the same. You people will never be safe' (as spoken to witnesses by Michael Adebolajo shortly after killing Private Lee Rigby in May 2013).

In late May 2013 we in the UK saw citizen journalism and its technology present a violent and bloody spectacle. The British Army soldier Private Lee Rigby was attacked and killed, indeed nearly beheaded, with knives and a cleaver near the Royal Artillery Barracks in Woolwich. Most notably the assailants, Michael Adebolajo and Michael Adebowale, sought attention from passers-by. They wanted to explain to the world that what they were doing was morally and ethically justified. The assailants had effectively constructed their own spectacle to be staged for a large audience, and given social media today, that is exactly what they got.

An anonymous passer-by filmed the attack on a mobile phone and sold it to the *Sun* and ITN, who posted it to their respective websites that afternoon. A high level of visits to the ITN site caused it to crash. Broadcasters claimed there were 800 complaints from distressed viewers, prompting an Ofcom investigation (Sweeny 2013a, 2013b). The images forced their way into public consciousness. We did not want them, we complained, we were outraged and yet we were drawn to them at the same time.

The Rigby murder may be considered in relation to Alain Badiou's 'passion for the real' (Badiou 2007). In his analysis of the twentieth century, Badiou described its key features in terms of visual spectacle. For Badiou, 'passion' is that thing which is missing from our understanding of the world. It is something we cannot access and therefore desire. Badiou's 'real' is defined as aberrant: a break from, or a threat to the patterns and parameters we view as reality. He distinguishes the Lacanian 'Real', which he equates with a sense of horror, from reality as a social order through which we conduct our lives. Badiou's 'passion for the real', calls into question the world as we see it. So when it comes to the images of the Woolwich murder, our passion for the real is inspired by all the things we do not understand, or cannot comprehend in those moments of suffering and horror, but which become both thrilling and painful at the same time. Buch describes how in Lacanian terms, 'the characterizations of the Real vacillate between a dimension that is somehow presupposed but utterly unknowable' (Buch, 2010, 9).

The Woolwich attack might promote a visceral experience in which we are drawn to a sense of horror or revulsion, but we are unable to digest content or meaning. It is a sense of incomprehension that drives our desire to keep watching. According to Badiou, such a spectacle causes a split in which the gaze of the viewer is both drawn to and confounded by the very un-reality of the imagery.

Herein lies an aesthetic to the image of Michael Adebolajo as he stands and talks to the assembled onlookers. A large part of its currency lies in its contradiction. A benign stance, hands outstretched as if in surrender, a man who moments before has engaged in an act of bloody decapitation, but then also apologises to a woman who is passing by, because, ideally, he would not have wanted her to see anything so horrible. The tragedy of this image is in its pathos and in its contradictions, because the real in the case of the Woolwich killing can never be pinned down to one representation, but a complex series of possibilities.

With constant delivery of the 'real' our comprehension is continually challenged. Slavoj Zizek discusses Badiou's spectacle as that which embeds into our consciousness and yet with time and repetition becomes disconnected from our reality. 'The real in its extreme violence is the price to be paid for the peeling off of the deceptive layers of reality' (Zizek 2003, 1). But conversely, Zizek also notes that the 'passion for the real' 'culminates in its apparent opposite, as a theatrical spectacle' (Zizek 2003, 2). The more confounded we become by today's spectacle of the real, the more skilful we become at ignoring it.

The Woolwich Massacre image, which had such a profound visual impact, did not find a place in my art room. The reason for this is best explained through Atkinson's description of the normative parameters of teacher and learner relationships 'when the latter do not conform to established frameworks of understanding' (Atkinson 2013, 137). Those teacher–learner parameters are further challenged by a third dimension in this case: the image, which also fails to conform to established frameworks of understanding. To discuss the Woolwich Massacre image, I would be 'putting myself at risk of', becoming unrecognized within the normalizing frame- work' (Atkinson 2013, 137) that governs my teaching practice. I recognise that I am most comfortable when I teach imagery, with equally violent themes, from a historical context and through the normalising methodologies of representation and deconstruction, which render the subject inert.

Judith Beheading Holofernes: a deconstructed method

'Approaching his bed, she took hold of the hair of his head, and she said, Strengthen me, O Lord God of Israel, this day and she smote twice upon his neck with all her might, and she took away his head from him.' (Judith 13:7–8)

My students are brought to the arts with the baggage of representation: 'What is it? What does it mean? How is it constructed?' In this way we teach young people to anchor their visual world to unassailable truths. Representation explains away the unexplainable, 'it orders the world and predetermines what can be taught'. Within such a discourse, 'we are perfectly safe, since it's only a picture' (Bolt 2013). This approach to the visual does not hurt; it is less likely to make you tremble. But it is a process which disengages the image from its effect.

It is at this point that I arrive at my second image. As the horrors of the Woolwich attack were unfolding, I was teaching my students about a 500 -year- old aesthetic in which horrors of biblical proportions are hidden in the stillness and shadows of a Caravaggio painting. I wanted my students to deconstruct methods in which artists apply the techniques

Judith Beheading Holofernes by Caravaggio 1598-99 (Getty Images)

of chiaroscuro. This exercise formed part of a photography project which explored the use of single-source lighting to create dramatic narrative effects. Caravaggio knew how to make his audience tremble. But my teaching was less interested in meaning and subject matter, focusing more on techniques we could borrow in order to recreate a dramatic *mise-en-scène*.

Judith Beheading Holofernes represents the Old Testament story in which the widow Judith saved the people of Israel against the advancing Assyrian army. In the story, Judith seeks out the General Holofernes in his tent, makes him drunk, seduces him and then beheads him. My students were intrigued by the violent tableau. One student in particular recreated her own response to the painting, creating a photograph of her sister. She said she was intrigued by the benign and beautiful expression of Judith. She wrote about how the expression contradicted the act in which the subject was engaged.

As my student explored the complexities in the Judith painting, I considered ways in which the same devices play out in the image of Michael Adebolajo. Both images adhere to an aesthetic of contradiction. It is an aesthetic that draws my students to that benign expression of the beautiful Judith in the throes of bloody and violent decapitation. In the same way we are drawn to the poignant tragedy of the contemporary assailants' self-righteous appeals.

For my students, it was the contradiction of Judith which made her image so sublime and so powerful. They used tools of deconstruction, disconnecting the widow from her act and creating a very different narrative effect. Using photography and Photoshop editing, my students were able to subtract the image from its violent and bloody context. The technique gave a new coherence to the abhorrent, creating an altered aesthetic. In this way my students engaged with the problematic and political nature of construction and deconstruction of images. Their critical engagement with the image became a political act of extracting the sublime from the horror. The image becomes an imprint or echo of its context. We might look to Deleuze's analysis of the constructs within cinema to discuss ways in which the image becomes both politically charged and highly subjective. In Felicity Colman's analysis of Deleuze, construction and perception of the image is guided in relation to our 'interests and our needs' (Colman 2011, 150). By this analysis, my students are socially guided in the way in which they work with and interpret the image. In *Cinema 1*, Deleuze notes this is

> a way of defining the first material moment of subjectivity: It is subtractive. It subtracts from the thing whatever does not interest it. But, conversely, the thing itself must then be presented in itself as complete, immediate diffuse perception. (Deleuze 1986, 63)

In British schools we work to a subtractive model, which places the acquisition of formal elements at its heart. Students engage in the analysis and production of art: line, tone, form. Through deconstruction we make sense of the image. We dissect the image to gain an understanding of the way it operates. It is laid out before us, as a rat in a laboratory, inert. Thomas Peterson refers to Badiou's critique of current aesthetics and its tendency to bracket this idea of 'truth' to the work of art. In English lessons, Peterson refers to 'customary didactic methods of analysing a poem that tends to fixate

on the contours of the self, that is on the subjectivity of the poet which the reader analyses and interprets for the sake of psychological identification' (Peterson 2010, 8). Peterson contrasts Badiou's 'ethic of truths', with a socially constructed 'ethics of necessity' found in a contemporary political culture of consensus and which in Badiou's terms reduces education to the dissemination of knowledge, but which negates learning and negates truth. In visual terms, the image is stilled by the brutal act of deconstruction.

My students are taught, by me, to use customary methods of deconstruction, to remove Judith from her context and therefore assign to her image an altered narrative. She becomes a fragment, displaced from her event. A renewed violence is found in the gap between a new reality (which in educational terms can be pinned to the normative parameters of expectation) and the real (the unexplainable, the unknowable, the unthinkable). Yet it is this very negation, the something that is missing, that holds such a powerful aesthetic. There is a beauty and pathos in the unreadable and the aberrant, in the blank stare that gives away so little, yet appeals to our passion, an urge to reach out for so much more. Buch notes that

> the fascination with the real is related to the ambition to produce presence, the irrefutable immediacy of powerful affect, brought about by the focus on the agonising body, but also for the desire to capture the opposite, that is, a presence that is never fully realized, present only by way of its absence, in the mode of withdrawal, palpable precisely by remaining inaccessible, ineffable. (Buch 2010, 17)

A performative method

> The image is alive, an intensive presence that insinuates itself into our world, so that we 'live it'. When we see a figure for example, a materialist account might ask us to consider not what it is, but what are the conditions through which it works? (Bolt 2013)

The violent image of Judith, in the act of decapitation, was made safe for the classroom when it was anchored to the structure of representation, but it occurred to me that I simply would not have known how to discuss the image of Michael Adebolajo moments after he publicly and brutally executed an innocent soldier. It would have seemed absurd to consider the play of light and shadow across the assailant's face. The image and its context seemed too raw to discuss it in terms of its aesthetic deconstruction. To ascribe the normative values of representation and deconstruction to the contemporary image would feel like a violent act.

Still from video footage taken during the Killing of Private Lee Rigby, 22 May 2013 (all rights reserved, ITN news)

Still, we work to a representational framework in which we struggle to make sense of the image. As long as we continue with this practice, I am concerned that there may be a gap between our visual culture and our visual education. Outside the classroom we are faced with a hectic wall of fragmented visual events. It is a spectacle which operates within the logic of the sensual, the physical, the imaginary and the emotional. Where does the messy, confused and sensual end and the articulation begin?

The images from Woolwich are still current, very much part of our social context today. The image is alive as long as it forms a crucial part of an unfolding narrative (the trial of the two assailants was ongoing as I was writing this article). In this way the image can be considered in terms the Badiou's 'truth-processes' in which we might read the image as both passionate, political and sensual. These are images which do not behave themselves according to representation. To teach them we would need to apply an alternative model. Barbara Bolt challenges us to consider the image not in terms of representation, but in terms of its performativity. She refers to the image in terms of 'imaging', considering its 'real material effects in the world'. Through imaging, Bolt offers an alternative to the limiting process of representational education, which 'orders the world, and predetermines what can be taught' (Bolt 2013). We are challenged as educators to consider the contemporary image beyond representation. 'Does the visual image, like the speech act, have the power to bring into being that which it figures? Can the image transcend its structure as representation and be performative rather than representational?' (Bolt 2013). Bolt advocates a consideration, not of the representational qualities of the art but of the conditions through which the artwork is made. Through this model, perhaps

as teachers and learners, we should form a dialogue relating to the conditions through which the images were first made, first seen and subsequently understood. Perhaps we should be discussing with students the fluidity through which our understanding and knowledge of the image changes with time. We might discuss the image not in terms of its narrative structure but instead consider our how our own context might affect our relationship with the image; 'What's my context? What's my story and how might this image change my story?'

The images of the Woolwich killing were so much more than representations of a tragic scenario. The pictures could be viewed in terms of event: the event of the killing, the event of the photographs being taken, the event in which the assailants performed for the cameras; the event of that visceral moment in which I first saw the images on the newspaper stand; the event of how I now consider the images and their effect on my teaching and learning environment. Perhaps the only truth to be read in the image is the way in which it has performed and continues to perform. Bolt cites Deleuze & Guattari, asking us to consider the image in terms of its materiality. We are asked not simply to experience the image, but to live the image, perhaps to be the image: 'The plane of material ascends irresistibly and invades the plane of composition of the sensations themselves, to the point of being part of them or indiscernible from them' (Deleuze & Guattari 1991). The image attacks, trembles and quietly breathes.

Conclusion

In British schools we work to a model which places the acquisition of formal elements at its heart. Students engage in the analysis and production of art: line, tone, form. By working in this way we make sense of the image. We gain an understanding of one way in which it operates. The image is dissected, deconstructed, laid out before us, inert. As an art teacher I am comfortable when I teach to a deconstructed aesthetic, in which I make sense of a world which cannot be explained or contained. I am confident when I draw on the past, but need to work harder to keep step with the images which shake my reality today. This is an aesthetic through which I am in danger of learning to skilfully ignore the real. I teach my students the art of fragmentation. I teach my students to conceal the passion – that which cannot be revealed – lest it should harm us in some way. I enable my students to disconnect themselves. Experience becomes dulled and diluted.

Is it more than a coincidence that as our 'passion for the real' becomes increasingly triggered by an ever-growing digital spectacle, our education system asks us to revert to the safe practices of technical representation? The conundrum we face with visual representation is part of a bigger cycle of education policy, which feeds into an even greater cycle of social reproduction. Dennis Atkinson regrets an educational climate in which we 'fail to mourn outmoded or redundant practices and values' (Atkinson 2013, 136). He more recently identified a mismatch between centralised state control and dramatic changes in global communication. 'It could be argued that changes we have witnessed in education, which has increasingly been subjected to the hegemony of audit cultures, are a reactive but failing response to issues precipitated by social change' (Atkinson 2011, 1). When faced with threat we retreat into safe familiar practices from the past. In Hegelian terms, 'History necessarily repeats itself.' Zizek observes the paradox of crisis, which may shake us out of our complacency but 'the more spontaneous first reaction is panic, which leads to a return to basics' (Zizek 2009, 18). In education, we hang on to the historical and by default we deny the visual world of the present. 'Our preservation is a critical quagmire, a stutter that never stops' (Applebaum 2013, 80).

I am concerned, if we look to the future, that such a discourse is going to increasingly lose its coherence. Ours is a technologically driven visual world, which is infinite, messy, beautiful and violent. Images are not 'safe'. We consume visual technology and the arts to make sense of our identities, our histories, our cultures. If we, as educators, continue to offer a reading of imagery through the parameters of representation, dissection and decapitation, we deliver a potential for mismatch, misrecognition and alienation. The problem is that the authenticity of representation is becoming increasingly implausible.

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