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Killing Fields: Concepts and Processes

Abstract
This is an accompaniment to the multi-channel video installation Killing Fields, for Visual Studies Senior Seminar. Images of violence are perhaps the most dramatically divisive and manipulative subset of consumed visuals. We refuse to condone "real" violence, and act appropriately shocked when violent images are labeled "real," but when they are "fake," we devour them with an insatiable appetite. Engaging this issue requires examination of the process by which images are perceived as violent — those particular components which make up a "violent image" and how visual definitions of violence are constructed, as well as issues of responsibility. What cues do image consumers use to identify what they may enjoy, versus what they must show empathy for? As image consumers, do we play of perpetrator, victim, or something else?

Keywords
violence, media, simulation, information glut, installation, video, Renata Holod, Holod, Renata, Visual Studies

Comments
Supplemental video clip (Windows Media 9) can be found here.

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Killing Fields: Concepts and Processes

James Matthew Weed

Visual Studies Senior Seminar

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Images of violence are a tradable commodity. Where do image consumers lie in the continuum of responsibility between perpetrators and victims? *Killing Fields* is concerned with media representations of violence, and how they mediate a reality which is often without culpability for image consumers.

Concepts and History

I began this project as a foray into questions about information glut – specifically, the excess of images an average consumer has to work through every day. How do we deal with this amount of visual information? How do we parse it out, or are we even able to? Too much information is just as much a problem as too little. In this state of overwhelming influx of primarily visual data, the most highly prized skill is the ability to filter and sort. Sensitivity is no longer either valued or even acceptable, as higher thresholds for stimulus are required for survival. Influenced by the work of artists such as the Ant Farm collective, Barry le Va, and the Situationist International, my early experiments with video and performance involved destroying computer monitors and televisions, manipulating the time component of the resulting footage to explore the destruction and reconstruction of the physical medium, the information "mouthpiece," which carried the visual information overload.

These experiments with time manipulation led to a second set of questions: could the networks that feed us images manipulate our perceptions in a similar manner? If images almost exclusively arrive on a screen, then could the boundary between reality and fiction be blurred enough to eliminate any perceptible distinction? It not only seems possible, but inevitable. We live in Jean Baudrillard's "hyper-real," where, in a state of total mediation, any sense of "reality" or personal, empirical experience is called into question.[1] In an endless proliferation of copies with no original,[2] reality ceases to exist, because it is no longer distinguishable from simulation – in fact, "the real…can be reproduced an infinite number of times."[3] This hyper-reality is rooted in epistemological questions about the possibility or impossibility of absolute, omniscient knowledge about the reality behind signs. For Baudrillard, there is no distinction between reality and simulation because we cannot tell the difference. Images can no longer be said to convey or distort the truth, because there is nothing "real" to be concealed or mediated by them – they exist of themselves, part of a "perfect descriptive machine which provides all the signs of the real and short-circuits its vicissitudes."[4] "Reality" and "fiction" are simply tags – labels – used by image manufacturers to allow image consumers to assume a preconceived attitude, one that will allow them to stay comfortably detached and consume without the

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[1] See Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra," *Simulations,* translated by Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext, 1983)
[2] See Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," as printed in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2001)
[3] Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra," 254
[4] Ibid.

responsibility of "involvement." Information channels (media outlets) have a vested interest in maintaining this detachment in consumers, since any kind of implication or placing responsibility on viewers would result in reduced profit margins. Once people are made uncomfortable by devices which have afforded them maximum detachment for so long, they simply change the channel or redirect their browser.

Still, exploring these issues in greater depth required that I narrow my focus. Images of violence are perhaps the most dramatically divisive and manipulative subset of consumed visuals. We are both attracted and repulsed by conflict, and the most "real" (i.e., physical, visceral, or tangible) manifestation of conflict is violence. The distinction between "reality" and "fiction" is particularly important here: for the most part, we refuse to condone "real" violence, and act appropriately shocked when violent images are labeled "real," but when they are "fake," we devour them with an insatiable appetite. Violence terrifies us, but also seduces us. As "visual culture" has become a marketplace not so much for ideas as entertainment, the images presented have become more graphic and sensationalized, in order to attract consumers. Violence is in many ways currency, commodity, and capital in the "Image Industry," whether for entertainment purposes in the cinema, or for spectacle value in news media. Yet these images serve a dual purpose. In Baudrillard's words, they "reinforce the reality

principle,"[5] that is, they shore up the legitimacy of authority structures in their claims to power. If images cannot represent an "original" underlying reality, all claims to moral authority are null and void; it is always in the interest of those in power to maintain the illusion of reality. Signs must signify. For example, while the televising of terrorist videos might serve to raise the ratings of a news network (through sensational spectacle), it also serves the larger purpose of legitimizing authorities' sometimes-questionable measures in pursuing their political ends. "Real" images in this case can serve as "proof" that the world is a frightening place and that it is worthwhile to surrender liberties in the name of safety. Yet if the very same images are used for both entertainment and political indoctrination, how can these dual attitudes toward violence be so pronounced, when they seem so markedly oppositional? It seems that we consistently engage in a contradiction: we accept the legitimacy claims of power structures which presuppose a basic reality behind images, yet we consume with abandon as if all were pure simulacra.

Violence by necessity has a perpetrator and a victim. As image consumers, do we play one or both of these roles, or is neutrality possible? What is our responsibility, and if we cannot in fact distinguish for ourselves between reality and fiction, can we be immune to both harm and culpability? Once these questions arose, my work on *Killing Fields* began to shift focus, becoming concerned with questions of exactly *how* images are perceived as violent – what components make up a "violent image" and how these definitions are constructed,

[5] Ibid., 262

as well as how responsibility might be communicated. What cues do image consumers use to identify what they may enjoy, versus what they must show empathy for? How is "violence" defined in a visual sense? In the context of art, to what extent is it possible to implicate the viewer in the violent act being portrayed?

Applying the idea of image as pure simulacrum to violence, it seems clear that regardless of what labels or methods of representation are used to tag violent images, the response would be essentially the same. Since all images exist independently of any kind of authentically experiential original act, they can all be seen as simulation – so "real" and "fake" are not only indistinguishable, they are essentially irrelevant. Image consumers, while they may not be able to articulate this concept verbally, know it intuitively. The act of consumption is free from any immediate consequences, allowing the visceral pleasure of a lurid scene to entertain without exposing the consumer to any risk. Since the image sequence is endlessly repeatable, those harmed or killed in it may be eternally resurrected, reassuring the viewer that nothing is really wrong, and he or she may keep a clean conscience. Because the "reality" is defined by the image, the original act loses its status as "real."

This concept can be seen most clearly in the popular and political response to the 9-11 tragedy. Karlheinz Stockhausen, a German composer, called the

terrorist attacks the "greatest work of art for the whole cosmos."[6] While his comment was inflammatory and earned him a negative reputation in the press, it points to the truly simulated nature of the event. When people first saw what was happening on television, many did not know whether or not it was in fact happening – their disbelief rooted in the recognition of the image as "something out of a movie." In this case, the model preceded its instantiation, or perhaps more accurately, the copy preceded its original. 9-11 seemed familiar; everyone who saw it on television felt that they had seen it before somewhere. They had: in the movies, on TV, in thousands upon thousands of "fake" images intended for entertainment. The disjunction was not intrinsic to the images themselves; rather it was simply that a very safe, clichéd visual was suddenly being re-tagged as "real." Re-interpreted in this light, Stockhausen's comments take on a different character, especially considering that the attacks were engineered to be seen live on television, suggesting that perhaps the terrorists themselves had taken a page from the disaster movie-maker's handbook. 9-11 was a "surreal" experience for no other reason than that no one had ever before seen those particular images with a CNN logo on them.

Recognizing this trend prompted yet another shift in the goals of the project. To comment on violent acts themselves would be irrelevant, since this "message" would simply be another tag applied to a simulation, telling viewers

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[6] In an interview with a Hamburg journalist, quotation from "Karlheinz Stockhausen," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia,* http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Karlheinz_Stockhausen&oldid=50983887 (accessed April 30th, 2006).

how to think and feel. In this case, the presentation would be nothing more than another point of view, presented with an imperiousness to rival that of the major news networks. Instead I felt it important to comment on the actual modes of transmission by which violent images are received – the methods of simulation and digestion of real and fake, pointing out how little difference there is between them. I also wanted to draw attention to the way media channels distill complex situations to simple sets of iconic scapegoats, whose actions are predictable as clockwork, and about whom there can be no ambivalence – a distillation which amounts to propaganda. These iconic figures, it seemed, were a channel through which responsibility could be safely redirected, away from viewers. By juxtaposing a commentary of the direct mediation and representation of violent acts with a commentary on the scapegoat figures to whom the acts were attributed, I was able to explore the more general processes of image tagging and responsibility-avoidance.

As a result, all images used in *Killing Fields* underwent a process of distillation, much like that of the major image providers – but instead of distilling data masses down to an easily processed message, my goal was to distill the pure simulacra down to their most basic components. Thus a viewer might be made aware of his or her own process of consumption, and be forced to confront the possibility of culpability.

The Installation

The *Killing Fields* installation consisted of three video channels and a multi-channel surround audio track. While I originally intended it for a closed gallery environment, I found a much more interesting and appropriate site: a movie theater. This environment, besides addressing many of the technical needs of the project, added an extra dimension of ambiguity to the viewer's interpretation process (since cinemas have a distinct set of cultural connotations: expectations of narrative, beginning and ending, and fantasy which has no "real" consequences after the viewing is over), and also provided a sit-down environment with a more immersive sensory experience. In addition, the experience of the installation would subtly shift with repetition, since each channel (three video and one audio) ran independently for different lengths of time. The channels overlapped differently with each repetition, further decentralizing any reference points or sense of narrative.

The primary channel, run from the theater's projection room onto its large screen, contained abstracted archival footage. It consisted of 9 segments, each of which I had taken from a separate original video, slowed down to one-eighth their original speed, and added applied color. Source footage included beheadings by different political and terrorist groups in Chechnya, Iraq, and Nepal, torture documentation from Brazil, firing squad executions from Vietnam, World War II, and the second Iraq war, and one scene of guerilla fighting in Palestine. These ran in an independent continuous loop that totaled 18 minutes after post-processing.

Technical limitations of the theater in which I exhibited meant that I was unable to use the entire area of the screen, since a standard DV projection has a 4:3 aspect ratio, instead of the cinematic standard 16:9 anamorphic widescreen. Still, the contrast and sheer size available with a cinema digital projection system greatly enhanced the immersion and readability of the visuals. This was particularly important for the center channel, since it had to compete visually with bright white projections on both side walls.

The side wall projections both consisted of hand-drawn pen and ink animations. These were largely caricatures of the iconic scapegoat figures, though the faces represented were not all contemporary, television-era characters. I selected them based simply on their ability to be recognized by a few particular cues. For example, both Napoleon Bonaparte and Fidel Castro might be recognizable by their respective hats, Hitler by his mustache, Bin Laden by his beard or turban. An average American (anyone who watches television or browses the internet with some regularity) could read and recognize these relatively crude drawings by their concentration on iconic, caricature-able features. Nine of these animations ran on each side wall in continuous loops of approximately six minutes length, with some subject crossover between them. They were located towards the front of the theater.

I mixed the sound in a widely-used cinematic surround format, so as to take full advantage of the theater space and sound system. Rather than a simple stereo image, surround encoding allowed for sounds to pan across the entire space, to

increase the sense of immersion, regardless of where viewers sat. The sound loop ran the longest of any channel, 22 minutes total, with about half of it containing a musical score, and a continuous panning helicopter sound with sporadic effects layered on top.

Process

Having embraced the idea of simulation and simulacrum as critical to the aims of the project, I was less interested in shooting original footage with the camera than in collecting and accumulating images. The internet provides many opportunities for gathering media which are censored for either ideologies or explicit content. Several databases offer archival footage that has been rejected by mainstream news outlets, usually from amateur sources operating within terrorist organizations. Interestingly enough, though most of these sites offer some permutation of the "unedited, uncensored reality" spin, they are themselves simply entertainment outlets. There is some irony in the "uncensored reality" shtick, since the targeted young male audience consumes the content in exactly the same way they might consume a movie (or pornography for that matter, for which the sites often carry ads). Furthermore, the resemblance to the rhetoric employed in the advertising of reality television is striking, as both claim to represent something essential, not constructed. They place an emphasis on some form of "authentic" experience of the "real world," despite the ironically obvious

mediation of these experiences by a computer or television screen (not to mention the interpretive perspective of whoever made the image). As such, there is nothing particularly objective about these internet sites in and of themselves, any more so than most mainstream media outlets; rather their value lies in providing a traceable route straight to the image author – in most cases is a terrorist, guerrilla, or other sympathizer with the act being depicted. Unlike news media outlets, there is no pretense of objectivity, since the sites operate by appropriation and collection, rather than providing any "original" content. It is biased, certainly, but not arbitrarily so, because its bias belongs to the original aggressor. The fact that the image-makers in this case do not presume to be neutral bystanders, but are actually aiding the perpetrators in the commission of the act of violence, gives the images themselves extra potency in implicating the viewer: anyone who looks at them is taking on the point of view of an assailant.

The problem is that simply showing this footage as-is produces a gut-reaction of revulsion and rejection on the part of the viewer, who will instantly make a scapegoat of whomever happened to present it, reflexively similar to the scapegoating process which media outlets engage in. The viewer in this case is able to escape responsibility by simply rejecting the act and its accompanying ideological motivation – without consideration of the image, its mode of transmission, or the decision to look. Taking on the idea of simple "cues" for reading violence in images, it is possible to distill the footage to its "essential" elements, by removing extraneous textures, colors, etc. What remains is an

abstract blueprint of an act of violence, not a direct representation; the set of motion vectors contained in the image are sufficient cues for the viewer to decipher its content.

The result of this abstraction is a significant delay in the visual interpretation process, providing a window of time in which the formal elements of the image itself (independent of its content or source) can make their own impression. After enough time has passed, the viewer inevitably reaches a point of realization, and the perceived character of the image changes dramatically. This point of reversal is the critical moment, where attraction and revulsion meet, and internal conflict arises. By this time, the viewer has already "consumed" the image, only realizing during digestion the true nature of what has entered.

It could be argued that all this merely amounts to playing a cruel trick. Yet this assertion is based on the assumption of the trustworthiness of image channels, and that there is some overarching moral guide for the display of images. The impulse to consume is automatic, indicating an assumption that media presented in certain contexts must be sanctioned by power structures and may be considered "safe" (a presupposition which seems more in line with fascist ideology than democracy). In the case of *Killing Fields*, the needed elements to decode these images were present all along, what was absent was the voice of a legitimate authority structure telling viewers the "right" way to interpret what they saw – appropriate to their own cultural context, without having to think. Was it real? Was it fake? How could one tell? In this case, the viewer is forced to make his or

her own ethical evaluations of the raw image, an uncomfortable proposition given the habituation to simplified messages in media channels.

Technically speaking, once I had appropriated the necessary archival footage, I had to reformat it from streamed internet files to fit NTSC requirements, which resulted in considerable granulation and loss of quality. This blurring helped in the process of removing recognizable pictorial elements. Certain areas of the frame were keyed out by means of their color, luminosity, or both. I was able to isolate the motion vectors of the figures or subjects of the image in space, removed from their original context. The act itself was preserved as a field of motion, devoid of context or ideological message. All original color was removed and replaced by an overall one- or two-color tint and grain pattern, in order to flatten out any remaining pictorial depth cues and cover processing artifacts. The idea was to concentrate all cues for figure, space, and narrative in motion vectors, while providing a somewhat "painterly" quality.

Once the footage was colorized, I further emphasized its motion cues by slowing it down to between one-half and one-third of the original speed, depending on the nature of the footage, which also helped to counteract immediate recognition and dismissal of the image. The resulting video segments ranged in length from 1-4 minutes, and I edited them together in series to run on the center channel loop of the installation.

For the side channels, my process was nearly opposite – original, manual creations, brought to life digitally by increasing their speed. These were not so

much animations as “progressive drawings” which employed a stop-motion method to give the illusion of movement. Beginning in each case with a blank sheet of paper, I layered images onto the surface, capturing them a little at a time by recording a half-second of video every time I made a change. Drawing was not the only technique I used – ink splattering and wrinkling, tearing, and cutting provided methods of layering so that I could progressively expose information. In its raw state, this footage had a slideshow quality to it. After being sped up digitally, the images took on a remarkably life-like character and began to exhibit more dimensionality. At between 5-10 frames per second, motion remained perceptible, while all the detail information of progressive still images was still readable.

In these animations, the “artist’s hand” is readily apparent, removing any pretense of objectivity that might be present in a mainstream image channel – these are entirely subjective in nature, obviously interpretive. Still, the easy recognition of the faces points out the collectivity of perception with regard to these iconic scapegoat figures. The fact that something so subjectively rendered could be so easily identified by nearly everyone forces the viewer to confront their own participation in a mass indoctrination of “bad guys” versus “good guys.” The face of the “enemy” is much easier to recognize than his actual doings (which are differently, but equally, abstracted in the found-footage channel of the installation).

Sound construction filled the middle ground between appropriation and authorship. I stripped sounds from the original found footage and used them for the base layer of the sound track. These included recognizable sounds such as shouting and scuffling from the beheading scenes, gunfire, and bomb explosions, but also completely foreign sounds, such as a partial beheading victim attempting to breathe through a cut in his trachea. In some cases, I left these clips largely in their original states, with only minimal processing, and only edited them for maximum dynamic effect. In other cases, I pitch-shifted the sounds and altered their lengths for more interesting environmental effect, and occasionally added surround-sound echoes, flange, phase, and reverberation effects. In the second layer I placed more abstract noise, sampled from the actual sounds of film cameras, tape recorders, and other devices used in television news casting. I processed these in a similar manner to the first layer, but mixed them at a much lower volume, to blend them into the background. I recorded the musical score for the piece (which only ran for half of the loop) with a guitar and a bass in an all-analog recording studio, then digitally processed the tracks to fit them into the surround sound field. To round out the environment, I placed a constantly-panning helicopter loop with Doppler effects between all the surround channels, creating the sensation that a news chopper was hovering in or near the auditorium space. Compared with the images in the three video channels, sound was by far the most narrative element of the installation.

Response

Audience response to *Killing Fields* was incredibly varied. Some, such as a middle-aged mother and her two sons, did not recognize the content in center channel, and read the surrounding stop-motion animations as a satirical commentary on the transience of despots. Others found the images unbearable to look at and left the auditorium in tears – though it should be noted that none of them held me personally responsible for their trauma; rather, they were simply deeply troubled and saddened by the realization of the source of the material. For these people, the stop-motion animations and sound took on a particularly malevolent and sinister character. Most fell somewhere in between the two extremes. Many said that they had been instantly attracted by the visual dynamism and easily recognizable iconography of the side channels, but once they had seen all of the faces, gradually shifted their attention to the middle channel. Having tuned out the more visually noisy side parts, they then gradually came to a realization of what they were seeing in the center, and while disturbed or horrified by it, many found that they were unable to stop watching. They became acutely aware of their relationship to the image and how they consumed it, aware of a choice to stay and see all there was to see. Many did feel that they had been implicated in the acts they had seen – not by action, but by inaction. Sitting in a movie theater, they had by force of consumptive habit become accomplices to atrocities taking place on other continents, in other decades, among other peoples.

In this position, image consumers cannot use their passivity as an excuse from responsibility, instead, it incriminates. While they do not physically perpetrate or actively assist in acts of violence, they are certainly not victims: victims are stripped of self-determination, but the image consumer chooses to look. The exercise of choice is integral to consumer culture, and it is this very exercise which aligns viewers with perpetrators. Without some interpretive mechanism to displace responsibility, they are faced with an uncomfortable choice: admit culpability, or willfully choose ignorance.

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