

TRAUMA FICTION AND MEDIA IMAGES IN TWO NORWEGIAN NOVELS

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ABSTRACT. *Trauma fiction and media images in two Norwegian novels.* The article explores the work of media descriptions in two contemporary Norwegian novels, Eirik Ingebrigtsen's *Heimfall. Ei juleforteljing* (2012) and Øyvind Vågnes' *Sekundet før* (2010). The main intention is to discuss their use of media images in a trauma plot, whereby I take as my point of departure some reflections on the photographic image. Similar to traumatic images, photographs can be described as literal and decontextualized, while the increase of circulating media images instead causes an overwhelming exposure and massive contextualization of a traumatic event.

Keywords: *trauma fiction, traumatic images, media images, ekphrasis.*

REZUMAT. *Ficțiune - traumă și imagini media în două romane norvegiene.* Acest articol analizează descrierile media din două nuvele norvegiene contemporane și anume *Heimfall. Ei juleforteljing* (2012), a lui Eirik Ingebrigtsen și *Sekundet før* (2010), a lui Øyvind Vågnes. Scopul lucrării este de a evidenția felul în care autorii folosesc imaginile media într-o ficțiune - traumă, având ca punct de pornire câteva reflecții asupra imaginii fotografice. Similară imaginilor traumatizante, fotografiile pot fi descrise ca fiind precise și decontextualizate, în timp ce folosirea unor imagini media larg răspândite duce la o dezvăluire coplesitoare și la o contextualizare generală a unui eveniment traumatic.

Cuvinte cheie: *ficțiune, traumă, imagini traumatizante, ekphrasis.*

Described images may have a number of meanings and functions in a novel. In trauma fiction, narrated images have traditionally often been photographs, and much of the theoretical discussion deals with this text-photo combination. Also my own reflections in the following take the photo-

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describing narrative as their point of departure, but developments in media and communication technology have changed the situation thereby allowing new and different questions to be addressed. In this article, I will start out with a brief presentation of some approaches to trauma and photography, before I make concentrated analyses of two Norwegian novels, which incorporate descriptions of media images in their trauma plot: Eirik Ingebrigtsen's *Heimfall. Ei juleforteljing* (2012) and Øyvind Vågnes' *Sekundet før* (2010). The analyses will emphasize the basic function of images in trauma fiction, but they will also show how effects and implications of image description have changed due to new media formats and channels.

Traumatic image, photography and narrated images

While trauma as a psychic reaction to shocking experiences is essentially volatile and demanding to represent, photography on the other hand is a durable image characterized by stability and closeness to reality. How can the affinity between them in spite of their differences be explained?

If we, firstly, take a look at some of the characteristic traits of traumatic memory, theorists frequently uphold that the remembrance of a traumatic experience initially does not take on a narrative form. On the contrary, it is "pre-narrative" or "pre-representational", Marita Sturken maintains, thus emphasizing that a concept like "traumatic memory" in fact is a contradiction in terms. Instead of being a narrative, or even possible to narrate, a traumatic event is revived in the mind as wordless and static images. In the moment when these glimpses are integrated in a coherent narrative, the memory of it is "produced", Sturken writes, thus taking a position that underscores the construction of memory rather than an idea of its referential way of working (Sturken 1999, 235). This attitude echoes the reasoning that Cathy Caruth has forcefully introduced. She understands the referentiality of trauma as incongruence between its happening and its recognition, as in fact an "inaccessibility of its occurrence" (Caruth 1995, 8).

Not everybody endorses this theory of incongruence and inaccessibility, but the notion of the literal and recurrent image is a frequent way of conceiving traumatic experiences. It is, as Roger Luckhurst says, an "unbidden flashback that abolishes time and reimmerses you in the visual field of the inaugurating traumatic instant" (Luckhurst 2008, 147). Maybe, then, as Luckhurst suggests, the visual intrusion occurs exactly because the mental capacity to integrate traumatic experience into a narrative fails. In consequence, it is in the image, rather than the narrative, that "the psychic registration of trauma truly exists" (Luckhurst, *ibidem*).

The "image" in this line of thinking is not, however, a rhetorical figure like a metaphor, but a very concrete, literal expression. As many scholars have emphasized, the intrusive image of trauma is a visual return of the event, a snapshot cut out of history. This literal aspect of the intrusive traumatic image makes it appear like a photograph, and the similarity between the traumatized modes of perception and reliving on the one hand, and the photographic mediation on the other is clearly due to this flash-like image – mental in the first case, iconic in the other.

If we, secondly, take a look at some of the characteristic traits of photography, theorists have always been triggered by the strange tie between the sign (the photo) and its reference (the object photographed). Roland Barthes emphasizes the referentiality of a photo when he states that a photograph "is literally an emanation of the referent" (Barthes 2000, 80). While Charles Sanders Peirce (1940, 102-3) defines the photographic sign as something in-between, icon as well as index, Barthes sees the photo more as an indexical sign where the causal trace between image and referent is practically undisputable. In either case the authentic code and documentary function of the photograph is highlighted, and regardless whether other photo theorists have disputed this simple assumption of a close identity between photo and object, the notion of its impact clings to the medium at least as a connotation.

Barthes' reflections also include some striking thoughts about photographs which relate them to traumatic memory or experiences of loss and grief. He develops the double concept of *studium* and *punctum*, where *studium* denotes the cultural, linguistic and political interpretation of a photograph, and *punctum* the wounding, personally touching detail. *Punctum*, the Latin parallel to Greek "trauma", is therefore in his interpretation the precious moment in a photograph. Moreover, and perhaps as a logic consequence of this trauma aspect, Barthes ties the photographic image essentially to death. Each photograph, he writes, "always contains this imperious sign of my future death" (Barthes 2000, 97).

Ulrich Baer maintains that the possibility to capture unexperienced events creates a striking parallel between the workings of the camera and the structure of traumatic memory. Clearly inspired by Caruth, Baer refutes the idea of reestablishing a context of the photo's production conditions, and warns us about overlooking "the constitutive breakdown of context that, in a structural analogy to trauma, is staged by every photograph" (Baer, 2005, 11). His suggested analogy between trauma and photography is, accordingly, to see both of them as glimpses of the past where any direct connection to a pure or primary experience is not only broken, but impossible to reestablish through contextualization.

With these reflections on traumatic memory and photography in mind, I will finally turn to the narrative form or genre, which stands in the foreground of this article, namely the ekphrastic text. In my context, the term “ekphrasis”, often defined as a verbal representation of a visual representation (Heffernan 1993), includes descriptions of both existing photos and fictional photos, so called notional ekphrasis. Furthermore, it is necessary to underscore that an image description often seamlessly changes into a description of something else, and thus the border between an ekphrasis and the surrounding text is blurred. A narrated image in fiction has other qualities than an iconic or indexical image, since it belongs to a different sign system, but simultaneously it is a description that relates to its object (the image) in similar ways.

In the following, I will explore the work of media descriptions in two contemporary novels and, based on these specific cases of ekphrastic writing, discuss some forms and functions of trauma constructions in general. The first case is Eirik Ingebrigtsen’s novel *Heimfall. Ei juleforteljing (Falling Back. A Christmas Story, 2012, my translation)*, where the personal experience of loss and grief in the main character is contrasted by the disappearances during the “Dirty War” in Argentina of the 1980s. My discussion focuses on the role and function of photography and internet images in this composite trauma plot. The second case is Øyvind Vågnes’ novel *Sekundet før (The Second Before, 2010, my translation)*, where the problems of picturing pain revolve around two parallel stories, which both connect to the public suicidal act of an Afghanistan war veteran. My discussion focuses on aspects involved in taking, exposing and watching photographs of suffering human beings, as well as the ethics of distributing such images through different media channels.

Death and disappearance: forgetting the present body while searching for distant images

In Eirik Ingebrigtsen’s novel *Falling Back. A Christmas Story (2012)*, its first person narrator, the 74 year old Johan, expects his daughter Judith home for Christmas on leave from a nursing home. Judith is fatally ill of a lung disease and is tied to her bed and her breathing machine. However, Johan doesn’t want her to come home, is exhausted by his own reluctance, and blames the institution for trying to cut expenses. He is ashamed of his mixed feelings about taking care of Judith for a few days, and recalls the years when his family of four was intact. Instead of offering her her old bedroom he prepares a room for her in the basement. There she is carried down by the carers and stays ‘stored’ from December 20 until Christmas Eve, when she dies.

Judith's arrival is a foreshadowing of death, and Johan cannot unambiguously welcome his daughter because her appearance functions as a painful intrusion into his life. She is not only a genuine, familiar person in need of his attendance and love, but also an intrusive object that evokes memories of other deaths and his own inability to cope with guilt and grief. Johan suffers from a multiple grieving situation, since his wife died the previous Christmas, and since his neighbor's son, Olav, was killed forty years earlier by a huge spruce that Johan cut down. This falling tree is a recurring image that he never gets rid of, thus he is still traumatized by the shock; the falling tree reappears as a nightmarish flashback, dynamic and violent, an overwhelming image repeated again and again in the novel.

A third loss is that of his other daughter, María, who is the secret of his life. At the time when he and his wife, Inger, were engaged to be married, Johan was a seaman on short leave in Buenos Aires. He had a one night stand with a woman who later gave birth to a daughter. As a teenager María disappears together with her stepfather, a political dissident during the "Dirty War" (1976-1983) in Argentina, and Johan frequently imagines a scenario where María and her stepfather are arrested, drugged and pushed out from an airplane over the Pacific Ocean. In his study at home, which had been Judith's room, Johan reads internet articles and other documentary reports on these historical events. He also tries to establish an irrefutable relationship to María by searching for DNA evidence. Judith's actual stay and corporeal presence in the house prove more demanding for Johan than the detective work for a daughter he has never seen.

Johan's closest neighbor, former colleague and friend, is Audun, Olav's father. Olav was killed when the two men took their children to the forest, and after that tragic event Audun never managed to take up his work again. The two neighbors share a common past, which Audun to a great extent has worked through, while Johan has seemingly not. Audun does not blame Johan for the loss of his son and he seems to have more empathy with Judith than her father has. A token of this difference in the mourning pattern between the two men are the Christmas gifts that they give to each other. In the course of the many years after the fatal accident Audun has put his thoughts about his son in writing, which he now passes on to Johan.

Johan's present is a photograph showing Audun and himself together, working in the forest. Audun is smiling and has placed his foot on the trunk of a felled spruce. In a striking contrast to the nightmarish flashbacks of the falling tree, the photo is stable and triumphant, as if the traumatic memories are tried being subjugated and erased by the photographic representation. The picture has no frame, but he finds another photo on the wall, takes off the

frame, removes two pictures from the inside and puts the photo of himself and Audun into it.

One of the photos he removed shows Judith with her brother Einar as teenagers and the other one is of Judith alone at the same age. In other words Johan removes the pictures of his children in order to frame the photo of Audun and himself. With this photographic reminder as a Christmas gift, Johan seems to want Audun to reconnect to their common past, which he actually does. But at the same time, if we read the act figuratively, Johan thereby loosens the emotional ties to his children, and Judith in particular. Before she is actually dead, he copes with his forthcoming loss by trying to forget her.

We can see the whole period where Judith stays with him in the light of Johan's numbed reaction to the knowledge of her imminent death. On the one hand, he knows that she is dying and does not manage to relate to her as if she were healthy and alive. He pushes her out of sight and mind, in the same way as he removes the photograph from its frame. On the other hand, when she dies, he does not seem to realize what is happening and continues to talk about her to Audun as if she were still living. He even reenacts the movements he used to make when bringing her food and drink. It takes his friend's intervention during their Christmas dinner for Johan to face the fact that his daughter is lying dead in her basement bed.

An anticipation of this development comes with the introduction of María by way of a photograph. While Judith lies hopelessly ill in the basement, Johan is constantly aware of her, but instead of keeping her company he continues his research in the study. On the wall he has hung a photo of María, the one that her mother Inés sent him after their daughter's disappearance, taken just a few days before she was abducted from Buenos Aires in 1980. The photo arrived in a thick envelope that Johan's wife Inger picked up from the mail box, then opened and read together with Judith, thus making them both aware how little they knew about his earlier life. This 'enlightenment' does not, however, lead to Johan opening up, but instead erects barriers between the family members.

For Johan, however, in this situation, where Judith is about to die, the photo of María represents something more than a reminder of her existence or a comforting distraction from his acute sorrow. He looks at the photograph, constructs a link between his two daughters, finds himself reflected in her eyes, and even thinks of it not as a replica, but the living person herself. Paradoxically, then, the photo of the disappeared daughter functions as a living substitute of her and at the same time intrudes into the relationship between the father and the other daughter, who is not yet dead. Johan lives in a confused situation where his daughter Judith is alive, but about to die, and

his other daughter, María, who has disappeared, but is not confirmed dead. He clings to the impossible hope that Judith will not die, thus trying to make María a substitute for the dying Judith by means of a photograph. He even directs his mental energy into this imaginary world induced by a picture instead of attending whole-heartedly to his still living daughter.

This effect of the photographic image of María is, however, not quite farfetched, since it is supported by the massive photographic documentation that was used in the Argentinian demonstrations against the disappearance of dissidents. There was a strategy among the Mothers, the Madres de Plaza de Mayo, who launched this kind of activism, to use photographic images to present a visual replica of the disappeared. This was done not only in order to recall the memories of a single person, but also to create an impression of a general national loss. Moreover, the critical situation that these persons were not confirmed dead, only disappeared, caused an ambiguity in the mourning process that was extremely hard to cope with. Accordingly, as Catherine Grant writes, the aim and effect of these photographic representations changed over time: "As for photographs, although the Mothers clearly used these initially for their testimonial and evidentiary status, as the physical scale of public demonstrations increased, the direct, personal associations of the photos became imbricated with their spectacular, memorializing effect" (Grant 2003, 68). She calls this development a shift from an indexical function ("this is my daughter or son") to an iconic ("here are the masses of the nation's lost children").

Johan connects to this larger context of national trauma and loss when he looks up sites on the net in order to investigate the destiny of his unknown daughter María. His explicit purpose behind this investigation is to write a text which could be a response to the two letters from Inés, which he never answered, but he also has a strange and unrealistic notion that he can make a difference. In this way, he tries to write his individual story and grief into a larger one, and thus perform an act where his actual shortcoming turns out to be more meaningful. His concern with María and the politics of Argentina reads as an atonement and at the same time as an effort to bring meaning and hope into the misery of his daily life.

In his novel *Falling Back. A Christmas Story*, Eirik Ingebrigtsen has interpolated the photographic motif in a context of trauma that describes and deepens the understanding of Johan's emotions and reactions on a multiple loss situation. The photo of his disappeared daughter María is a contrast to the living daughter Judith and juxtaposes life to death, replica to the real, and past to present in a way that strengthens the portrayal of Johan's confusion and subconscious feelings. It also shows his effort to bring his personal grief into a larger context and thus make his losses more understandable and meaningful.

His Christmas present for Audun likewise connects to these profound tensions and is on the one hand a sign of his tendency to suppress and forget, but on the other hand it is perhaps also a way of looking forward, of consolidating his friendship with Audun. The internet technology in this case seems to be not only an easy way of tracking persons and events from the past, but also a tempting distraction and escape from present problems.

Documenting torture: the ethics of media images and photographic art

While the Argentinian arena of violence and political murders in Ingebrigtsen's novel is a distant reality though fatally affecting Johan's life, the war in Afghanistan suddenly brought international conflicts and their realities into Norwegian society. The invasion of Afghanistan by USA in 2001 had UN approval and was supported by NATO. Since the turn of the year 2001-2002 around 7000 soldiers have served in the Norwegian Special Forces in Afghanistan and ten Norwegians have been killed.²

The Norwegian military engagement in Afghanistan augmented the media attention towards the country and its political situation. Not only military and medical personnel, but also politicians, journalists and photographers took part in the diplomacy and the media coverage of this 'war against terror' in a country far away. During a stay in Kabul in 2008, the foreign minister and his staff were involved in a terrorist attack, and one journalist from the newspaper *Dagbladet* lost his life.³

In Øyvind Vågnes' novel *The Second Before* (2010) the many ethical aspects of documenting pain and torture by means of the camera are discussed in a fiction with several hints at the actual global crisis and the following intellectual debates. The plot of the novel is concentrated around two main characters, the photographer Jonathan Becker and the art curator Kaja West, and describes one day in their lives where they both are incidentally confronted with a man who commits suicide by burning himself to death right outside the museum where Kaja works. Their respective link to the horrific act is that Kaja's curated exhibition is to be opened that day while Jonathan films the man on fire with his cellphone camera. The man turns out to be Lars Thormundsen, an Afghanistan veteran and earlier boyfriend of Kaja.

As a newspaper photographer Jonathan has made a short visit to Kabul, where he and his journalist colleague were hit by a road bomb.

² Numbers downloaded 2016.01.07 from <http://icasualties.org>.

³ In the terror attack on Kabul Serena Hotel, January 14, 2008, the *Dagbladet's* journalist Carsten Thomassen was shot and killed.

Seemingly unharmed, apart from a facial scar, Jonathan nonetheless loses his enthusiasm for taking pictures, and on this actual day he has in fact quitted his former profession. His dedication to photography was motivated by having fun, not by any social or political commitment. Suddenly he stands face to face with this strange man, who seems to call to him, and he automatically grabs his phone and presses the recorder button the second before the man ignites his lighter. This reaction makes him witness the tragedy without interfering, thus receiving astonished disgust and criticism from other onlookers.

Instinctively he turns over the footage to the newspaper editors who immediately publish it on the net. His attempt to withdraw the footage is of course futile, and the only comfort he gains is an assurance from the victim's girlfriend that he has nothing to blame himself for. According to her, Lars was profoundly traumatized and mentally instable after his return from the war. Jonathan also enters into an intense discussion with the editors on the meaning of the suicidal act, which they interpret as a political statement. Before his act, Thormundsen had strategically sent a photo of himself to numerous people, including the media, and therefore possibly wished to have his death publicized and broadcast. Jonathan, conversely, remembers the gesture from the man as an invitation and hesitates to read his destiny into an international activist context.

A main attraction in the upcoming exhibition that Kaja has prepared is an installation with strong resonances to the scandalous torture practices in the American prison Abu Ghraib in Iraq. Photographs of physical torture, sexual abuse and humiliation of prisoners provoked outrage across the world and became iconic references in both art and popular culture. At the entrance to the installation, the beholder can read the following message: *"Please note: This installation contains extremely graphic and violent images, which may offend some viewers"* (Vågenes 2010, 103, English language and italics are original). The installation is described through Kaja as a dark room with TV monitors and loudspeakers on two opposite screens. The concept implies that the beholder is trapped between images of a photographer in uniform pointing at her with his camera on the one side and images of a person undergoing torture and a dog barking and snapping on the other. The dominant impact of the display on Kaja is an intense feeling of being caught in a virtual world of pictures where the perpetrator forces her to identify with the victim, while the victim forces her to identify with the perpetrator.

As a curator Kaja is proud of her exhibition and defends its aesthetic use of violence and images of people in pain, while both her boyfriend André and some of her colleagues question the ethics of this artistic exposure of human suffering. To her annoyance newspapers and critics refer to the

exhibition as provocative and controversial, even before the opening and only on the basis of some PR material. Contrary to these, in her view, superficial and narrow-minded judgments, she finds the performance politically important and aesthetically innovative, since it is forcing the beholder to partake in an almost real situation.

After the dramatic suicide outside, and very much against Kaja's immediate wish and advice, the board of the museum decides to close the newly opened exhibition. The dilemmas of the art-versus-life opposition escalate further when Kaja learns about the identity of the burning man. She then changes her mind. Unexpectedly, she now suddenly finds herself deeply affected by the suicide and supports the decision to close the museum as an ethically correct response to the invasion of reality into the world of art. Powerful memories from her past life with Lars show up, and she remembers in particular a photo of the two of them, taken on a trip through Europe. She used to love this picture, but when their relationship broke up she tore the photo to pieces, put the pieces in an envelope and sent them to Lars. Now she wonders whether his suicide on her doorstep and its morbid photographic documentation could possibly be a response to her insensitive message.

In both cases, Kaja's and Jonathan's, the degree of personal involvement decisively influences their way of responding to photographic images of death, pain and suffering. It also forces them to question earlier views regarding ethical standards, and we can observe how the plot development pushes them into a reevaluation of their more or less fixed principles. Jonathan is essentially apolitical and doesn't care very much about the consequences of his footage. But when he realizes how it is unscrupulously used, how it becomes a media hit and will be seen by the victim's friends and relatives, and later also by his own now two and a half year old son, he revises his opinion. Kaja is extremely dedicated to art and is convinced of its power to influence people into empathy with victims of terror and to stimulate their political engagement. Her conviction of the necessity of exposing pictures has now been shattered because she was intimately related to the victim.

The Second Before discusses challenges involved in drawing up borders between life and art, reality and visual representation, and the ethical judgments that follow. Its plot development is underpinned by references to iconic images with political impact and global range, which increases the immediate relevance of its thematic. Two images from the history of war photography connect directly to the "second before" topic. One of them is Robert Capa's photo from the Spanish civil war in 1936, which shows a man in the moment just before he gets killed. This photo is discussed in Jonathan's class, where the teacher emphasizes the impression it gives of being staged

and as such creates a reaction in the beholder, rather than the fact that someone is dying. The other photo is Eddie Adams' "Moment of Execution" from Saigon in 1968, where a civilian is shot in the head by an officer. This photo is mentioned in Kaja's introduction of the exhibition, in which she discusses the staging of documentary photos, referring to the fact that this iconic image, part of our collective trauma, was in fact taken outside instead of inside because of the light conditions.

Jonathan's filming of the man on fire happens seemingly impulsively and is certainly not anticipated by him, but has been staged by the suicidal man himself. Nevertheless, there is a kind of automatic response in Jonathan's act that provokes him to question his own behavior. What was in his mind the second before? Is his action a product of learnt behavior and is he a manipulated object of powerful media processes? Kaja's text provokes reflections on how we can avoid being involved as witnesses in the world of images when we are daily exposed to visual representations through blogs, web cameras, mobile phone cameras, etc. Her intentions behind the exhibition are precisely to force the beholder to experience and understand that there is no escape from the world of representations and images, and she wants to explore the implications of this fact. The events in the novel respond increasingly to these statements when Jonathan's film is distributed on the newspaper's webpage and is watched by his girlfriend Sarah on large TV screens at Amsterdam airport, as well as by Kaja and her colleagues in the museum.

Also the suicide motif is echoed by anticipations in the history of photography, by suicides committed both by persons who want to direct public attention to a specific political case, and by photographers who have witnessed human suffering without being able to help. A prominent example of the last is Kevin Carter, who won the Pulitzer Prize for depicting the famine crisis in Sudan in 1994. He photographed a starving toddler trying to reach a feeding center when a hooded vulture landed nearby. Three months after he won the prize, Carter took his own life. In Vågnes' novel this story resonates in the circumstances around Thormundsen's suicide which Jonathan witnesses without interfering; he just documents it on his cellphone video recorder. After handing over the footage to the newspaper, and after being confronted by the editor's – not unexpected – actions, he is forced to recognize his own responsibility as an active participant.

The described images in this novel are primarily elements in a discussion of the aesthetic and ethical aspects of the visual regime of representation in contemporary culture. As Kaja maintains, the world of images is one that nobody can withdraw from, and her own story confirms that point. As Jonathan's story exemplifies, a naïve attitude to images is bound to throw their makers of them

into situations where they are forced to engage in the events, be it their own choice or not. Kaja's intellectual standpoint is probably irrefutable, but it is nevertheless challenged when it comes to personal involvement. Jonathan's innocence is shattered when confronted with the shocking suicide. Ultimately, both of them experience a collision between attitude and ideology on the one hand and a confrontation with 'real life' on the other – a confrontation that causes the very concept of reality to corrode.

Photography in a multimedia trauma context

In *Falling Back. A Christmas Story* there are several photos described, from traditional family pictures on the wall to portraits of missing persons on the internet. One of them is a photo that Johan prepares for Audun as a Christmas present. The function of the photo of Johan and Audun is as a gift, and thus the picture is primarily an object exchanged between friends. But at the same time this photo is put into a frame instead of a photo of Johan's children, thus leaving the impression that he represses his memory of them. This effect appears as a parallel to the 'storing' of his daughter Judith in the basement, where she lies dying while Johan is unable to face the fact that she is fading away. Furthermore, his energetic internet search for his disappeared daughter in Argentina also looks like a distractive and futile move in order to forget the dying Judith. On the wall in his office, Judith's former room, a photo of María makes him think of it as reality and not as a replica, thus he is trying to make his disappeared daughter become a substitute of the present one by means of a photograph.

Johan's paradoxical condition is not only to be haunted by images from the past, which would be a typical situation of trauma, but also to be haunted by his own obsession with images. Maybe it can be understood as a kind of dissociation from the problems at hand. In Johan's case the photographs have both literal and metaphoric meaning, while pointing both to his grief and to his subconscious drives. The internet search offers him comfort in the global context of the distant María, while his blurring of replica and reality discloses his profound confusion. The described photos, accordingly, function both as objects that may be exchanged, as representations of persons who play a role in Johan's life and may be mistaken as real, and as indexes and metaphors in the construction of individual and collective trauma.

Also *The Second Before* presents a number of photo descriptions, ranging from existing and internationally known iconic images to private and professional photos taken by Jonathan or in the possession of Kaja. One function is the familiar one, that photos in albums and cellphones help people remember their loved ones. Another is to send messages, as Kaja does, when

she tears the photo of Lars and herself to pieces to express her wounded feelings and hurt her former lover. The ethical aspects of the classical war photographs as well as the forthcoming installation in Kaja's museum frame the most important concern of the novel, namely the film recording that Jonathan makes of the burning man and the implications of this act. This film as well as still photos from it are repeatedly described and reflected on by its photographer, his colleagues and other onlookers in ways that make it an object of various ekphrastic descriptions in the last part of the novel.

These ekphrastic texts offer multiple perspectives to the described and interpreted imagery and allow for different responses. Clearly, in the moment the film is delivered to the newspaper, it is out of Jonathan's hands and beyond his control. The descriptions of it follow other agents in a media show without a single, definite producer, as well as a group of onlookers around the main characters. Jonathan's instinctive reaction and motivation behind the overturn of the material, is to get rid of it, as if he could wipe the devastating event out of history and mind. Ironically, he is instead confronted with a massive reproduction followed by other people's stories and speculations.

The most striking difference between a photographic ekphrasis and descriptions of live media images, such as the problematic is dealt with in these novels, is the expansion of narratives and reproduced imagery around the represented event. The media machinery generates a variety of versions and responses, which compete in the race to finding an explanation behind the shocking event. Whereas trauma photography represents "constitutive breakdown of context" (Baer 2005, 11), the new multimedia situation shows instead how a traumatic happening can be overwhelmingly exposed by contextualization due to extensive circulation and dissemination of images.

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