

PARALLEL VISIONS

excerpt on *Liberty(leading the people)*

By Denise Spampinato

The images we ‘take’ enframe us. Those, which fascinate us the most have the power to possess us momentarily until they slip into the anonymity of public imagination in which everything resides as a metaphor. In the occult sciences of the Renaissance, the word *fascino* conveys a dual power: to seduce and to cast an evil spell. Refraction, diffusion, obliteration, capture, enframing, dispersal: these are *just* some modes of exorcism.

In Dorit Cypis’s installation, “Liberty (leading the people)”, the transformation of the news-image conveys to the work a sense of deflected vision: in holding the mirror to the image one discovers the paradox of both image and mirror. Here is the paradox of the mirror: it reflects, dispersing the light of the image as a form of protection, but it also captures the image within itself. What we find in the mirror is both a virtual representation and a physical presence. Again, exactly the same image, but not the same.

There is an agonistics here: the attempt to disarm, diffuse, disseminate the image as much as possible through its reflection, and at the same time to amplify it well beyond its topicality as “news”, or its tableau scale.

“Liberty (leading the people)” is an installation in two acts, presenting the drama of a large photograph (48” by 62” inches) reflected in a floor mirror having the same dimensions.

The original image is a newspaper photograph depicting Palestinian children on the run; the caption states the context: “Palestinians try to avoid tear gas fired by Israeli soldiers in the Southern Gaza Strip Town of Khan Yunis.” But we do not need to know this; the caption belongs to the inner genesis of the work. The artist forces the viewer to engage with the image and in doing so the ‘condition’ of the people is momentarily lifted out of the web of ostensible justifications according to which their misery is self-inflicted.

What counts here is what we see: there they are, once again ...the fleeing men and children.

How ironic that an oppressed people must always be shown on the run. A conquered people on the way to somewhere else. We have seen them before: carrying their infirm in wheelbarrows, struggling with their terrified animals, or wearing that mask of astonishment that is unmoving and unforgiving. We have seen them in their destroyed buses, a momentary respite from the vagaries of being a refugee. Subject different groups to violence and you remove their cultural specificity and reduce humans to what the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben has called, “bare life.” The word “exhausted” does not even confer the proper euphemism. When they are not shown on the run, we see them dying, defeated, raging. These are the paradigms we have created for a people we never see in the news in their “banal domesticity.”

The image of the oppressed becomes a metaphor for motion: it is precisely this trope of velocity, precariousness, displacement that Cypis is “stilling” by capturing the image, diffusing (and defusing) it in a mirror. Taming it and setting it back into motion, on its way to... Her enframing arrests the gaze, it forces us to look harder, and to interpret their plight by reading from their gestures what the context oftentimes refuses to provide. Language can try to blunt the visual testament of suffering, but it will always fail. Of course others would say, what about the suffering they may have brought on someone else? If so, then everyone’s suffering, one at a time without placing one over the other.

Yes, as Sontag has rightfully noted: a photo is an argument for a way of packaging the world. What is referred to as the simulacra, the nihilism of the image, is really the symptom of a vast undifferentiated space, emptied of the gaze of dissent, or of contemplation. Mediation is the art of trespassing absolute positions. The artist as a mediator is simultaneously the petitioner for the other, and the advocate for self-reflection. The directionality of this discourse is radial, but ultimately it returns us to the body: but never just “my” body.

What would be the “practical” use of a parallel vision, if any? What does it do in the “real” order of things?

Parallels do not meet, nor do parallel worlds, but a parallel vision presumes a hypothetical order of things, a language that can accommodate the “as if” and the “what if:” the impossible violation of our limited expectations. A parallel vision presumes a language that deflects the excessive preoccupation

with the center — the “me” and “mine” of nation, consciousness, body, interest - toward a more varied configuration of what is near and far. Perhaps we need the aid of geography, of geology to compensate for the speed of information, and to cue our sense of duration to the time it takes to look, to feel, to attempt to comprehend.

The images we see in our daily newspapers are perhaps the closest image of our physiognomy as a culture. We can even attempt to “divine” our oracle from these images, just as the ancients divined their auspices from the intestines of sacrificial goats. The etymology of the word “tragedy” means goat song. What would be the genealogy of our images?

There is something to be said about the mystery that makes us feel secure only if we can anticipate the inevitable return of the same, which is in essence also a form of delay. Delay of death ...of life? Delay of the significance of the image. What would it mean to reconcile oneself to the ruptures caused by the images of disasters and wars: ruptures in that other parallel world of our private lives in which we infinitely fashion ourselves?

Here are some modes of reconciliation with the photograph:

We seek them. We shoot them. We frame them. We trash them. We forget them. We disfigure them. Or we try to transform them so we may recognize them once again.