The Telegraphic Abject: Buddhist Meditation and the Redemption of Mechanical Reproduction

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AN ALTERNATIVE SENSE OF GORE

Are our minds becoming numb to images of death and violence? Though this question could hardly be settled even by the most extensive public polling techniques, it is of grave concern to theorists of modern visual media. It has become almost common sense that something momentous has happened in the proliferation of mechanical reproduction and electronic simulation, transforming our very sensory faculties to dangerous and largely disempowering effect. Some of the most radically historicizing media theory written in recent years concerns the alteration of our senses by discourses of vision or technologies of mass-mediated visuality (Crary 1990; Buck-Morss 1994; 1997; Feldman 1994; Levin 1993). These writings often turn on arguments about violent ruptures in modernity between the body *qua* body and the body as represented visually, especially where it concerns the depiction of the abject, such as in graphic violence and death. An over-kill of body-imagery circulates in what may seem like a post-modern "hyperspace" without corporeal bearings (Jameson 1991), flowing in "global mediascapes" with little regard to the limitations of time and space (Appadurai 1996), in flattened simulacra divested of multi-dimensional sensory embodiment (Buck-Morss 1994; 1998; Feldman 1994), and in an apparatus which enforces the privilege of the realm of vision over all other sensory channels (Crary 1990; Levin 1993). Two-dimensional reproductions swirl over the surface of the planet, carrying impressions of the body in violence and in death, graphic images that repeat themselves with such serial regularity that we are possibly becoming inured to them, and ever further distanced from the suffering they represent. Where our capacity for empathy, outrage, and compassion disappears, there also goes our ability to initiate sane reactions to insane actions.

In a world where the genocide of hundreds of thousands of Rwandans can pass unhindered and even be shuffled from attention in the U.S. mass media by the arrest of a celebrity athlete for murder, this critical position is perhaps stand-

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ing on some tenable ground. The culturally and historically particular effects that contemporary visual media work upon our senses may help empower everything from the racist deployment policies of military intervention and humanitarian aid (just compare Kosovar refugee camps and Rwandan camps), to the conduct of seemingly blood-free war overseas (compare the living room during the Vietnam War and the Gulf War), and arguably even to the lack of inhibitions in spontaneous mass killings carried out in U.S. public spaces.

And it would be natural, when thinking critically, to pose against this violent reworking of visual perception of the body a more organic sense of corporeality. The idea of a whole being, apprehended by a multi-sensory awareness of bodily existence, is often set off against the idea of a flattened body and anaesthetized senses, though often only implicitly. A lost, organic sense of corporeal being might implicitly serve as the affronted ground to the figure of what Jonathan Crary, for one, has called "the relentless abstraction of the visual," a "regime of vision" where "if images can be said to refer to anything it is to millions of bits of electronic mathematical data" (1990:10–11).

This article is a highly particular response to important general discussions concerning what happens to awareness of the body under the influence of our world's media of image reproduction and simulation. It is against the narrative of a body hypostatized, de-realized and anaesthetized, and a sensorium differentiated, dismembered and disciplined by modern regimes of vision, that I hope to brush slightly across the grain here, through exploring a technology of image reproduction that may have unusual and apposite things to say about the relation between techniques of seeing the body and awareness of its suffering: Buddhist meditation on corpses and body parts. I will turn attention to this Thai practice of visualizing revolting aspects of the body in death and dismemberment in order to work through and imagine differently many of the issues confronting us in a world full of violence and the representation of violence, a world in which shock is driven by profit, and profit by shock, in which gore is deployed or hidden as befits the agenda of powerful structures, but in which shock also seems so necessary to work against the grain of these powers . . .

Imagine that it were possible to perform an autopsy on yourself, while you were still alive, even. Imagine that your scalpel and arthroscopic filament, cutting and sliding through the flesh of your corpse, left no traces, drew no blood, and that you could move through the organs without fetter, and see and touch them intimately. Imagine that you could nestle yourself right up next to that skeleton upon which everything hangs, and even draw so close as to lie within it. To wait quietly within, as it waits. To see and feel things from its point of view.

Such is the quiet abiding in Buddhist meditation on death, corpses, and bodily parts. In deep states of embodied concentration, relentless meditators focus their inner vision and sensation upon the parts of the body and the body as a corpse, absorbing into an interior charnel ground that festers with graphic im-

ages and insights. In Thailand this is called *asubha kammaṭṭhā̄na,* contemplating the repulsiveness of body parts, one of the most powerful practices in the Buddhist repertoire of form absorptions.

"It cracks open, divides, and separates," says the nun Mae-Chi Liem of her forays into the charnel ground within. "This body opens up for you to see. You see bodily ooze, clear ooze like in the brain; thick, filmy ooze and clear ooze. The body splits open into intestines, intestines the size of your wrist, *na.* Liver, kidneys, intestines, the stomach, you can see it all . . ."

With this sensational faculty of seeing in deep meditation, the mind's eye impinges upon the objects of its attention. It rubs itself into the gory aspects of embodied existence, brushing up against an insight into their composition. That is the Buddhist confidence in visions of death, not only that death is certain and in its own unpredictable way, predictable, but that in death, intensely examined, there resides a pressing and almost certain effect of existence that can be seen intimately. *Dukkha,* suffering, is always groping at us, and the nuns and monks of Central Thailand who dwell in stark lairs of its imagery claim that only if you can lay your hand on *dukkha* can you ever grasp it, take its hand off of you, and then let it go.

But to conceive that such a specialized and cultured form of vision could have anything to say to discourses about modern or postmodern visuality may entail the adoption of a different configuration of the relations between theory and ethnographic content than is traditional in cultural anthropology, or typical in the disciplines that draw on cultural anthropology.

THE METAPHYSICS OF BODY PRESENCE

The political meaning of shock effects in "our time" is a subject of complex scope, and where it concerns the depiction of graphic death and violence—in a word, *gore*—moral indignation rises in various, often contradictory ways. Generally, there is a great sense of urgency that violent acts, committed in so many places near and far, be brought to light and attention. Perhaps nothing has suited this purpose more powerfully than the ability of photography, film, and video to communicate the extremes of political violence and suffering, injecting abject evidence into otherwise politically sanitized environments. As John Taylor (1998) explores in an argument against the "compassion fatigue" thesis and against strict propriety and fear of glut in news portrayals of "body horror," photojournalism often exerts powerful ethical pressure on political situations despite direct and indirect codes of censorship. It seems, from Taylor's (1998) analysis of British discourse, that public discussion in England is focused on propriety: at what level is the graphic too offensive for public sensibility? By contrast, in the United States, discourse concerning violence in the media centers around the possible power of violent images to cause real violence. There is widespread condemnation in public discourse of attempts to exploit, profit from, or otherwise use graphic imagery in ways that might produce a voyeuris-

tic thrill, or even pleasure, leading to desensitization and possibly even to violent acts (Bok 1998; Moeller 1999). In sum, there are in public debates over sensationalism ambivalent feelings that graphic detail can arouse true indignation and ethical sentiment, yet at the same time fears that too much will turn peoples' eyes away, offend them, or finally even bore them.

Such sentiments are repeated in more precise theoretical writing. Susan Sontag's *On Photography* (1978) is the seminal expression of fundamental theoretical suspicions of photographic representation, and especially of the false relations of proximity set up by photographs between subjects distant in time and space, enabling a false familiarity with the horrible and creating ever greater tolerance of violent imagery. Presumably, false contact with and pseudo-witnessing of the horrible is considerably enabled by a technology that severs vision from its spatial and material ties to place, and can circulate surrogate versions of the bodily form in pain far beyond connections to corporeal matter. More recently, in line with this critique, Susan Buck-Morss (1994; 1997) has identified in technologies of image reproduction the general formation of a violent, "modern sensorium," as she has called it. Buck-Morss explains, for instance, that cinema spectators learn a peculiar form of phenomenological reduction whereby they cut off their normal relation to objects in the world. In this trained cinematic perception, the image of a speeding locomotive, for instance, no longer frightens the audience, as some say it once did in the early days of film, because the audience has learned a cognitive operation by which they are severed from both their own corporeal existence and its relation the bodiless images on the screen (1994:48–50). "The surface of the cinema screen functions as an artificial organ," a "prosthetic" that does not "merely duplicate human cognitive perception, but changes its nature" (1994:48). This prostheses represents a radical re-ordering of the perceptual status of reality: "On the screen the moving images have a present meaning despite the absence of corporeal bodies, which thereby becomes a matter of indifference. What counts is the simulacrum, not the corporeal object behind it" (Buck-Morss 1994:50).

Buck-Morss argues that this modern sensorium imposes a phenomenological-like reduction by severing film images from connection and identity with the material objects from which they derive. For instance, when film is projected on a screen there is no actor physically present. But even more, in the ideal-typical consumer experience, there is not really a corporeally present viewer either. Viewers are only sporadically aware of themselves as bodily existing presences during the absorbing moments of cinema experience that commercial film makers often strive for. They are transported from their bodies, and into the cinematic world. Whereas, in reaction to this cinema-effect, Antonin Artaud (1958), for instance, imagined a "Theater of Cruelty" which would rescue real pain by transmitting physically present vibrating emotions from the actor to the audience—from gut to gut—the eviscerated cinematic experience of cruelty absorbs the audience in a state of distraction. Buck-Morss asserts that

the bodily reaction of the audience is more or less cut off: no one rises out of their seat to rescue the victim (1994:56–57). One sits still, as Siegfried Kracauer wrote, "spellbound" and "hypnotized" (Kracauer 1960:160). Unable to move, unable to do anything, one is hypnogogically pacified in the midst of the most extreme violence and agitation.

This is the ur-form of "simulacrum," Buck-Morss contends, for the cognitive operations by which the reality of the images become rendered irrelevant make the screen level the sole realm of reference: signification and reference collapse into each other (1994:50–53). There are only ever two-dimensional "bodies" up on the screen—non-material, non-corporeal, non-real except to the degree to which they have meaning and reference within the cinematic world of the screen itself.

I imagine that "hyperreality," to loosely borrow Jean Baudrillard's (1997) loose term, would be the ultimate dystopian culmination of these effects, where reference to the real carries exaggerated gravity, but only insofar as media representations themselves become the only valid index of what is real. Moreover, it seems that within this realm the taking of profit and power in shock may lead to a need for more and more shocks. The technological and cultural operations of objectification performed on death may remake it into an exchangeable object of consumption, highly valued, highly profitable, and much consumed, but at that same time depleting, with every objectification, every exchange, every consumption, the very sensitivity and sensorial faculty to perceive death and know it has meaning. And yet, miraculously, at the same time that realm of reproduction is still somehow animated, invigorated by this process, becoming in itself the authoritative venue for the staging of the real.

Indeed, perhaps the quick turnover of graphic imagery which fuels this historical movement would not be possible without a process which Allen Feldman identifies as "cultural anaesthesia" (1994:90). This is his "gloss on Adorno's insight that in a post-Holocaust and late capitalist modernity the quantitative and qualitative increase of objectification increases the social capacity to inflict pain on the Other," and, Feldman adds, "render the Other's pain inadmissible to public discourse and culture" (1994:90). The media apparatus, as Feldman puts it, "jettisons the indigestible depth experience of sensory alterities" (1994:91).

And yet this is only one side to the story, and as such potentially capitulates in the singular dimension of a forward-moving story modernity tells about itself. The turn of the last century was, similarly, a particularly fruitful time to proliferate discourses on the "deadened nerves" that result from the hyperstimulation of modernity (Singer 1995). As Lynne Kirby has pointed out, at every recent stage of development in image reproduction—from painting to photography, photography to film, film to video, and video to digital imaging—a cry of alarm is sounded over the loss of authenticity in images of death (Kirby 1995). By contrast, as Feldman presses further, there may indeed exist, per-

haps, possibilities and conditions for opening alternative communications of perception and memory. But what relation might these possibilities and conditions of "sensory alterities" have to mechanical reproduction as it is now known? In what does, or could, the positive value of an alternative sense of the abject consist?

Julia Kristeva's daunting *Powers of Horror* (1982) explores a conception of the abject which is unabashedly universalist in its assertions. For Kristeva, the abject—intentionally and repetitively over-defined in the book in order to perform its resistant excess—is simultaneously primal to, generative of, and reproductive of culture, language, and subjectivity. The abject is the necessary condition of these "things," or rather, of these primal refusals: I, language, culture. The abject is also their always-lurking, always-already-implied, undoing and defeat: "A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me. On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me" (1982:2). It is with analysis from a deliberate universal subjectivity that Kristeva contemplates "the utmost of abjection"(1982:4) in the corpse:

> A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not *signify* death. In the presence of signified death—a flat encephalograph, for instance—I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death (Kristeva 1982:3).

This distinction between signified death, itself signified through a sign of the modern, on the one hand, and the true theater inhering in the presence of death's substances themselves and which show their truth to you, on the other, may appear to be too simple. But that would be a predictable, orthodox response, fitting the current templates of interpretation and the lock-step of what counts as knowledge in these constructivist days. What of that meaninglessness? The human sciences with their contemporary penchant for construction, context and order rarely issue the license to generalize far enough to appreciate an insipidness which might conflict with, or even threaten, the sense-making of proper social thought. For Kristeva, literature's willingness and aptitude for taking on this task is what makes it the ultimate arbiter of the abject. By contrast, perhaps the refusal to acknowledge death as more significant for challenging meaning-conferring systems than for being a product of them, is part of that massive denial of the "nurturing horror" that Kristeva claims civilizations "attend to pushing aside by purifying, systematizing, and thinking: the horror that they seize on in order to build themselves up and function" (1982:210).

And yet—seeming to prove the obvious criticism right—in valorizing this face-down of the abject Kristeva constructs a hierarchy that is all-too-specifiable to her cultural and historical space. That mythology evoked by the sign of encephalographic signing, that is, the mythology of modernity, haunts

the analysis at almost every turn. As Anna Tsing points out, "*Powers of Horror* follows an insulting evolutionary track from Africans and Indians to Judaism, Christianity, and, at last, to French poets" (1993:180). For Kristeva, the deep psycho-symbolic economy of the abject can be uncovered through analysis both breadthwise—by assembling comparative ethnological difference for its demonstration of common denominators—and lengthwise—through abjection's teleological development from primary process, children, primitives and madmen, toward modernity and its most cultured products. That is, Kristeva celebrates and anticipates the historical replacement of religion by transgressive art, specifically by literature, the highest cultural form to ever face and embrace the power of horror and reach "the sublime point at which the abject collapses in a burst of beauty that overwhelms us—and 'that cancels our existence' (Celine)" (1982:210).

As a stepping stone to the bigger and better accomplishments of French transgressive literature, ethnological variation serves its purpose. This service is, as Anna Tsing has commented, to "an epistemological dichotomy between European 'theory' and global 'empirical' variation in which, by definition, the Third World can never be a source of theoretical insight" (1993:180–81). The way to disrupt this boundary and subvert this power equation is, however, not obvious.

The traditional method for identifying and valorizing sensory otherness through concepts of culture, unfortunately, is no less embedded in a narrative of modernity, often enlisting the discipline of cultural anthropology warmly in the performance of difference. Emblematic of this approach is Claudia Classen's *Worlds of Sense,* which retells the familiar story of "the rise of sight and science," and how the Enlightenment enthroned vision over the other senses, to their detriment (1996:7). *Worlds* necessarily includes the almost as frequent sub-plot about those other cultures who do not think about perception or knowledge with predominantly visual metaphors, who privilege other sense channels or do not distinguish sense channels, and who upon contact with modernity are on the verge of losing their senses. While certainly a corrective to essentialist accounts such as *A Natural History of the Senses* (Ackerman 1991), and part of the author's larger and richer history of European multisensory perception (Classen 1994; 1998), *Worlds* depends on an absolute otherness which virtually ensures that this otherness will have very little to say that is not rather vague: "For the Desana, existence in this world is a dream, a mere reflection of the reality which exists in the other dimension" (1996:11). The use of the visual metaphor "reflection" notwithstanding, these other worlds must be approached "within the context of a particular culture and not through generalized external sensory paradigms" (1996:135). But if these worlds are only valid within a particular culture, and cannot be generalized, then the initial promises of a liberating alterity, or short of that, a better insight into something valid more generally, can never be realized, since the audience to the work is presumably not a part of the other's sensory world and so therefore excluded

from the only context in which the cultural content has any validity. There is little possibility of translation—and certainly none for dialogue—when one party is a learned scholar and the other lives in a dream dimension. And yet somehow "these cosmologies are so powerful in their differing sensory symbolism that they shatter conventional western perceptual models and open us up to completely new sensory universes" (1996:135). However alluring it may be, with sensory alterity confined at such an exoticized distance the likelihood is certainly low that even subtle shifts in attitude might result—let alone the shattering of our sensory universe consequent upon reading a book. It may be the case that the romantic wings of anthropology—which otherwise seriously consider the possibility that there is something to be learned *from* other people as much as *about* them—have done more to shuffle people off into irrelevance than to promote an engaged contest of thought.

The theory of comprehension only from "within" an exclusive alterity, confined to ethnographic context, precludes dialogue because the analyst's ideas, theories, and categories are allowed to travel, to penetrate or at least to frame the others' world, while the others' theories, we are told, can only be understood in context and as culture. This may deliver, vaguely, a sense of difference situated in a distant, dying, or dead realm beyond modernity, while quite articulately it does more to perform the reality-effects of modernity discourse than unsettle them.

Lurking behind this suspicion of the effects of modernity on our senses (but not of the sense of the modern itself), is the association of sight and science with literacy, and orality with the pre-modern and traditional, following Walter Ong (1988). One wonders if the plot devices in the story of how literacy brought the death of orality are not also re-performed in the critique of visual representations more generally as well. And indeed there is a quite recognizable "metaphysics of presence" residing within many critiques of media imagery. It is not unlike what Jacques Derrida deconstructs from within the Western tradition of writing against writing (Derrida 1998 [1967]). According to this philosophical tradition, which Derrida argues is virtually ubiquitous in Western thought, the real "presence," purportedly, and face-to-face interactions between real beings are substituted with the inferior and even "dangerous supplement" of written discourse. The long history of writers writing against writing, beginning perhaps with Plato (also an imago-phobic), was Derrida's favorite scene for deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence, and for his dissemination of iterations about *"arche-writing,"* an already-writing even before writers define what is not writing (in writing). These anti-writing rhetorics accumulate authority by referring truth to an extra-textual something which they, by definition, have already named unrepresentable and so not presentable in the text. And yet the entirety is advocated through writing itself. Loosely analogizing Derrida's critique of anti-writing rhetorics, we might consider many critiques of media representation as textual arguments that turn on a moral authority re-

ferred, similarly, to an extra-textual "real presence." Critiques of death and violence in media images are, more often than not, pinned on arguments against the violent exclusion of presence—of real bodies, senses, and feelings—from two-dimensional reproductions. However, the authority of such arguments is nevertheless delivered in text, in precisely a medium that supposedly excludes those presences.

One would be well cautioned against falling too readily into a metaphysics of presence when contemplating both textual and imageric representations of "embodied existence" and "the senses." It is too easy to prey upon what I would call a *nostalgia for embodiment* which is common among contemporary intelligentsia who have dedicated themselves to a life of the intellect. For instance, it is typical to complain that there is "a tendency in contemporary anthropology to privilege the linguistic, discursive, and the cognized over the visceral and the tacit. We have lost an understanding of the body as an experiencing, soulful being," as Robert Desjarlais relates in an otherwise astute piece of fieldwork, *Body and Emotion* (1992:29). To remedy such modern loss, the new ethnography of the senses will have a new way of writing that can actually afford bodily exchange between the author and the reader: "a way of writing ethnography that includes the reader's body as much as the author's in the conversation at hand." (1992:20). Analytic frameworks surrounding the return of phenomenology to social theory, and signaled in current anthropological discourse, for instance, in such terms as "embodied knowledge" (Jackson 1994; 1996; Csordas 1994; Stoller 1998; see also Howes 1991; Steiner 1989) and even "sensuous scholarship" (Stoller 1997), etc., as insightful and creative as they are, may be even more interesting when informed by an interrogation of yearnings for a metaphysical transcendence of the text.

In contrast to these approaches, a counter-intuitive criticism of mass-mediated imagery, if only *partly* faithful to deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence, might open up unexpected avenues for the formation of critical practice. Where do we stop, and representations of ourselves begin? How could the media be divested of "real life," when the media *is*, to some extent, our life? And we might also ask, practically speaking, what is the point of single-minded critique of the flatness of media representation when there is no force on this earth that could ever rid us of it?

What would it mean for media criticism, for instance, to assert that photographs do not destroy the bodily nature they represent, but that *bodily "nature" is itself already akin to photography even before the dawn of its technology?*

Certainly sometimes the situation calls for . . . no, cries out for . . . the classic critique of representation and its humanist message and call for presence. And why shouldn't it, in some sense? Isn't there a difference between suffering and its representation? Isn't there a difference between suffering the wrath of an authoritarian crackdown, or being shot, or being tortured, and the mere

representation of these experiences, after the fact? Only the most self-absorbed philosopher would deny the significance of such distinctions.

Inflecting the technology of mechanical reproduction with Buddhist visions of the corpse may dishevel the contradictions at work here. And this encounter will depend on dislodging ethnographic content from a prison house of ethnographic context which might otherwise obscure the potential of alternative practice as a source of theoretical insight, rather than as a source of empirical global variation. Attention to Buddhist visualization may help redeem mechanical reproduction from a metaphysics of presence which might otherwise obscure the powerful and radical potential of image-copying technologies. This powerful potential—and this is my central argument—far from excluding the "real presence" of bodies and feelings, may heighten our awareness of them . . .

CORPORE OBSCURO

Objects, reflecting light, press outward from themselves, leaving their imprints on photographic negatives like footprints in the sand. Or, as Andre Bazin said of the ontology of the photographic image, like the face of a corpse on a death mask (Bazin 1968:12). And so is it with Buddhist meditation on death among the nuns and monks in the Central Thai monastery of Toong Samakhi Thamm Temple. In fact, corpses are of the greatest worth for impressing upon the mind an eidetic reminder of mortality, almost as though one's mind were light-sensitive paper. To make that impression, nuns and monks retire to intensive, sometimes life-long meditation on the corpse. While seemingly morbid, this attention to the body in death is integral to the Buddhist soteriological path, as the nuns and monks of Toong Temple in Central Thailand understand it. The body must fall apart and die, as universal law, but that one must fall apart emotionally along with it is not written in stone, as it were. The organizing trope in Thai Buddhism of *dukkha,* "suffering," necessarily demands an intimate confrontation with the painful and disappointing tendency of the body to fall apart and die. It is the practitioners belief that only by coming to terms with this truth can one ever get out from being emotionally subject to it. And yet, when studying their practice, it seems they have as much difficulty as anyone else in trying to realize the significance of the one thing humans seem most adept at avoiding. But that is the necessity, as they explain, for marking a relatively systematic route toward an awareness of death. And they take aim, as it were, by means of vision and imagination.

Techniques for harnessing vision for this purpose are ancient, as far as texts can tell us, and yet are also very present in contemporary temples such as Toong Samakhi Thamm in Thailand. To enter into an atmosphere regnant with death, nuns and monks avoid the diversions of everyday life, sometimes living in cremation and burial grounds, sometimes alone in the forest, sometimes in a reclusive monastery, all the while dedicating their life to systematically training mental attention, eventually cultivating a pronounced ability to visualize. Most

important in this cultivation of vision, meditators are instructed to spend as much time as possible around a cadaver. There they should clearly inspect every detail of it, and use the detail to commit it to eidetic memory. The corpse should be stared at over and over, with particular attention to its most gruesome details. Buddhagosa, in the ancient, classic meditation manual, *Visuddimagga*, lists ten such details or aspects worth impressing on the mind: *the bloated, the livid, the festering, the cut up, the gnawed, the scattered, the hacked and scattered, the bleeding, the worm-infested, a skeleton* (Buddhagosa 1964). The text then goes on to further describe each aspect of decomposition in the most lurid and prurient detail, deliberately, it almost seems, in bad taste. *The livid,* for instance, is "reddish-colored where flesh is prominent, whitish colored in places where pus has collected, but mostly blue-black . . ." *The festering* "is trickling with pus in broken places." *The gnawed* "has been chewed here and there in various ways by dogs, jackals, etc." *The scattered* "is strewed here and there in this way: 'Here a hand, there a foot, there the head.'" *The hacked and scattered* is "scattered . . . after it has been hacked with a knife in a crow's-foot pattern on every limb." *The bleeding* "sprinkles, scatters, blood and it trickles here and there . . . smeared with trickling blood." *The worm-infested* is "full of maggots (Buddhagosa 1964:186–220)."

Here the corpse in its gory, abject, and repulsive state is the most desirable aesthetic. Once thoroughly fermented in this aesthetic of gore, meditators perform the crucial next step of imagining themselves as such a corpse, applying the visualization to their own body as if it were in a state of exposed internal organs and repulsive detail. As part of their formal meditation discipline, they systematically visualize parts of their body such as skin, nails, teeth, hair, spleen, liver, and intestines, roving up and down the body until they see themselves as a corpse.

However, as it turns out, lately the practitioners of corpse meditation at Toong Temple generally avoid using real corpses to accomplish this impression. Besides being hard to acquire for these purposes, and tending not to be especially perdurable, corpses have also caused significant political trouble for the temple. Strangely (considering the subject of this article), a team of British tabloid journalists once came to the temple and photographed the nuns taking apart a corpse, and published it with the caption "Thai Buddhist Nuns Eat Human Flesh." It caused a national controversy, and the temple had to promise the government it would avoid contributing to such National Image-damaging fiascoes in the future. Ironically, precisely because of the precariousness of photographic meaning, the temple for the most part can no longer use real corpses, and has instead to use, as in many other Buddhist temples in Thailand, *photographs* of corpses for their meditation (usually culled from hospital autopsy procedures).

How great of a loss is this? Would the "real presence" of a corpse be essential to impressing upon the mind the details of corporeal mortality? Is the phys-

ical presence of the cadaver different in nature than the two-dimensional, "mere reproduction" of the body in death?

Meditators at Toong Temple surround themselves with many visual reminders of death. They hang skeletons of their deceased colleagues in their meditation hall, and collect both common autopsy photographs and photos of their own dead. One set of photographs are given a prominent place on the altar in the nuns' meditation hall. The photographs have captured the various things done to hone a meditation tool: first the nuns and monks got together and placed the corpse of a dead nun outside on a bamboo table, to watch it decompose for awhile, though not for too long because red ants will eat it all up. Then they boiled her cadaver in a big pot. They took out the cooked body with black, charred pieces of flesh hanging from it, and put it back on the bamboo table for more viewing. After that, the nuns took a meat cleaver to it, and scraped the burnt skin and grizzled fat and muscle from her bones, and with bare hands pulled out all her intestines and internal organs. One picture is particularly disturbing: of the nun's corpse sitting up on the bamboo table after being boiled. Her seared face was grinning. The cooked flesh had been scraped off of one arm, so that one could see, poking out from her stewed torso, the thin bones in her arm with flecks of wet meat sticking to them. Finally they boiled and cleaned the bones again, strung them together, and hung them just to the right of the altar in the mediation hall, where they remain, hanging over one's shoulder while one views the photographs.

Such photography of abject bodily dismemberment can be directly incorporated into the practice of meditation, and in Toong Temple is often pivotal to its effectiveness. But the first step in the process involves cultivating the basic ability to concentrate on an object of mental attention, regardless of its content. *Samā dhi*, "concentration," is usually built up through the technique of mindfulness of the breath. This may require hours, days, or weeks of sitting with the mind focused on the sensation of the breath at one point, most commonly where it passes the nostrils. One focuses on that point alone, constantly returning to it when distracted, until one builds up enough momentum in concentration to hold to the one point easily. With the ability to focus the mind to near one-pointedness based on attention to tactile sensation, meditators then transfer concentration to vision of a physical meditation object: the photograph of a corpse. Meditators impress the physical sight of the autopsy photograph on their minds by concentrating first on the outer sight, with special attention to the graphic details. They then attempt to reconstruct the image within "inner seeing" (*hen pai nai*) or "inner looking" (*maung pai nai*). In Thai Buddhism, what is referred to in English as the "mind's eye" would fall within the rubric of the mind as the sixth differentiated sense organ, in addition to the Euro-American five. In this conception, the mind as a sense organ has as its objects the appearance of any phenomena which do not have material contact as a condition of their immediate possibility: in other words inner picturing, monologue, intentions, thoughts.

The advantage of this six-sense perceptual model, in Thai meditation, is that it does not privilege the mind as a separate receptor of the five senses, but as a sense like any other, which as will become clear later, is central to the theoretical orientation of meditation. But this meditation is hard practical work, and rather different than simply declaring that there is no inner or outer, that dualism is false, or that there are people who do not distinguish body and mind. The hard work is in taking the abject object inward—given that the abject at first may indeed appear to be what Kristeva describes as having only one quality of an object, "that of being opposed to *I*" (1982:1). One begins with roving back and forth between the physical image and the mental image, each time staring, concentrating, trying to be more and more accurate in the inner visualization, and then comparing it with the outer, physical sight of the object, developing a closer and closer match. If one is a cultural other who does not distinguish between inner mind and outer world (*lok pai nai / lok pai naug*), then of course this cannot be practiced. But in Thailand this technique, what is also called "touring the cemetery within," (*bai teio ba cha pai nai*), is possible both to conceive of and to perform. The exercise itself can bring the mind to a fairly concentrated degree of *samā dhi,* such that a clear and detailed image of a body part or an entire corpse is impressed on the mind's eye.

The practitioners can then work on that image alone, in the absence of the physical object, and focus on it just as one would focus on the breath as a meditation object. The point is to be able to cull from the material world a reproduction in the realm of inner vision, which one can work in formal sitting meditation, without need of any physical sign. One calls the mental image to mind over and over, hour after hour, day after day, week after week. There are three patterns of experience in *samā dhi* which meditators report one might pass through, with enough continuous effort. The first is called "momentary concentration" (*kannika samā dhi*), when concentration becomes focused, but only in temporary spurts. In the initial momentary concentration, one gets what could be characterized as merely an unusually clear version of ordinary inner picturing. The second is "threshold concentration" (*upajhā na samādhi*) which is on the verge of absorption. Threshold concentration is deeper and lasts longer than momentary concentration, and it is in threshold concentration that the mind may start to see clear and whole inner mental images. At threshold *samā dhi*, the inner visualization is of another order. It has its own momentum and appears seemingly without volition, popping up more or less clearly, detailed and complete such that it can be taken as an object of meditation, which is to say, as something already *"there"* which one can focus on. The third kind of *samā dhi,* is called "attainment concentration," (*ā pāna samādhi*). In this case absorption has occurred, and the image has become absolutely stark and clear, and it becomes the only thing present, such that there is no longer any reference point outside this absorption from which the image can be said to be "out" or "in," or even "there" in the usual sense of the terms. Through continuous prac-

tice, one's *samā dhi* builds up toward absorption in the image, until the immaterial image-object itself is taken so deeply in that it is not much like an object anymore, and it snatches one into a spiraling descent, heading straight into its repulsiveness, and one is dwelling right in the heart of an image of death. In all this, it is the graphic and gory aspect, the foul and repulsive detail which carries the greatest eidetic-mnemonic power.

The bodily details "stick to the heart," *did chai*, as the nuns of Toong Temple say. Mae Chi Liem has regular experiences of seeing into her body. She got her first look at herself in the form of a corpse when, after a teacher admonished her for being proficient at falling asleep while sitting, she stood up and leaned against a pillar, and saw her body was a carcass, "rotten, disintegrating." She followed the instructions to use this image as a meditation object, to focus and sustain it, to guard it and return to it over and over, then and in the future. She has since often been cultivating visions of her corpse:

> I see my body bloated and rotting. I see clear greasy pus and thick, filmy pus. I see the head and brains, and from there see all the way down to the neck . . . I see the bones in my skeleton, all yellow, yellow . . .
>
> This body of ours, there is nothing to it. There is only the four elements—earth, air, fire, water—and the parts of the body. It is all *dukkha*—birth *dukkha,* old-age *dukkha,* pain *dukkha,* death *dukkha, dukkha*-sensations, pain and stiffness.

Just like her best friend Mae-Chi Liam, Mae Chi Sa-Gniam began practicing meditation with the five basic *asubha kammaṭṭhā na* objects in order to familiarize herself with death and *dukkha:* head-hair, body-hair, nails, teeth, and skin. She got her first *kammaṭṭhā na,* or meditation tool, after about one month of intensive solitary practice. She saw her form, *rū pa,* and saw her skin close-up:

> I saw the greasy skin-hairs all separately, far, far apart! And it looked disgusting, and *scary.* I saw the flesh along the holes of skin-pores, each hole far, far apart! The holes of the skin-pores were huge. I saw how crude, crude flesh is.

She was shocked at how "filthy" (*sogkaprog*) it all was. After seeing the filth, her *"chid salod,"* her mind had a great let-down. The word *"salod"* is precise here, and often used in this context: one might use it to describe the feeling when one is really elated, and then something happens to suddenly bring you down, a deflation. She says it was a terrible "let-down," to see for the first time what we are really covered in. "My mind was let-down so much, so much."

It may seem counterintuitive that this is so valued and desired an experience for practitioners of *asubha kammaṭṭhā na.* As Stephen Collins writes of *asubha* meditation in Sri Lankan Theravā da Buddhism, the contemplation of the negative and averse characteristics of the body is often balanced by practice ideals of positive and cheerful comportment (1997:195–96). In the Thai temple Wat Toong where I studied Buddhist *asupha kammaṭṭhā na* in 1992–1993, 1995, and 1997, there were several practitioners for whom such a balance of emotional forces was obviously necessary, but more for whom this was not neces-

sary and who expressed suspicion of such emotional needs. Rather, as Collins also discerns, the demonstration of positive external signs of contentment may be both a necessary social exchange in performing the value of Buddhism to the rest of society, and perhaps also an actual effect of the beneficial practices of this form of meditation (1997:201–2). Mentioning the "positive side" of Buddhism can also assuage the concerns of academic readers who might get undesired impressions about Buddhists because they do not share the same values. On the other hand, there can be no doubt that this meditation on seemingly morbid subjects can become, in fact, morbid. An early Buddhist text in the disciplinary rules for nuns and monks tells of the occasion when Buddha came up with the rule forbidding suicide, after a group of monks became so despondent after contemplating corpses that they took their own lives, or had others kill them, *en masse* (Collins 1997:195). I myself have witnessed monks go into complete nervous breakdowns, for lack of better words, during the practice of Buddhist corpse meditation, including what clinicians might identify as psychotic hallucinations and fantasies. At the temple where I studied there is a short but significant history of the some-odd meditators whose "minds cracked" (*sati daek*), as they term it, at the sight of meditation imagery, most of whom never recovered. In the ancient Theravā da manual, *Visuddimagga,* Buddhagosa wrote of the meditation on corpses, "For among the thirty-eight meditation subjects expounded in the texts there is no object so frightening as this one" (1964:193).

A particularly telling analysis of the difficulties in appraising the values woven into Buddhist meditation on death and repulsiveness is explored in Gananath Obeyesekere's reflections on the cross-cultural salience of the clinical psychological category "depression." The interrogation of the category was sparked by a Western doctor's pronouncement that Obeyesekere's associate, a Sri Lankan lay practitioner of Buddhist meditation on death, had "a classic case of depression" (1985:139–40). Rather than interpret the man's preoccupations as oriented by the Buddhist notions of *dukkha* or "suffering," the doctor deduced a clinical disorder. Similarly, Obeyesekere argues, "semen loss" disorder, a common diagnosis in South Asia with clear signs such as weight loss, sexual fantasies, night emissions, and urine discoloration, could in the same manner as "depression" be easily "proven" to be a universal disease if the classic constellation of symptoms in semen loss are present everywhere, which happens to be the case (1985:136–37).

If Obeyesekere's critique is applied to the example of the modern media disorder called "desensitization," or perhaps to the diagnosis of "body loss" in sick forms of media, a complicated picture results. What is the constellation of symptoms in "desensitization?" In Thailand it is not unusual to find oneself in a room with the corpse of a deceased loved one where family members are crying and not one arm's length away a monk and others are cracking jokes and laughing. No one present finds this a violation, or assumes that mental states, like colored cloths, must be modulated to avoid clashing. This would be un-

thinkable behavior for, say, a doctor in the United States. And yet the corpse-naming, organ fights, and other antics that are after-hours routine in U.S. medical school anatomy classes no doubt are intimately bound up in another specialized relation to the visceral shaped by institutions which may be necessary for analytical acts such as surgery. In fact, it turns out that the biomedical procedures of autopsy—the birth of clinical knowledge in the corpse which for Michel Foucault (1973) was the turning point of modernity—are a resource frequently drawn upon in the practice of Buddhist corpse meditation in Thailand, whether through frequent visits to hospital forensic laboratories or through distribution of photographs taken during autopsies. Clinical media such as *Gray's Anatomy* charts and statuette models are common paraphernalia in Thai temples.

But these practices and artifacts do not in themselves contain any particular meaning by virtue of a technological nature inhering in the medium. Imputing an essential effect of the technologies of medical science on consciousness is no different than imputing it to a work of art: is there really a style of painting or way of writing a novel that serves the revolution, and another style that is inherently decadent? Is the bio-medical conception of the body necessarily more violent and available to power than that conceived in acupuncture meridians? Is there a style of media violence which we can identify as dangerous simply by describing its technological form?

Even so general an attribution as "photographic realism" to the interest in death imagery in Thai Buddhism becomes complicated upon deeper inspection. Despite frequent admonitions in Theravā da Buddhism to view corpses in order to see the unsavory "truth" about your body, in fact ultimately the practice of *asubha kammaṭṭhā na*deconstructs this discourse of truth in later stages of practice. In one such practice, advanced meditators actively play positive and negative visions off each other, through such tactics as visualizing attractive bodies and alternating that with their opposite. The point in *asubha kammaṭṭhā na,* for advanced practice, is not to tear off the mask of beauty as illusion and see the stark reality, as though the ultimate truth inhered in abject detail, and constructedness in beauty, nor least of all to balance the positive and negative so as not to be "too dark." Instead the purpose is to see the constructedness of both the attractive and the repulsive themselves, proving to the heart (*chai*) that there is no essential truth which inheres in objective form, whether that of abjection "in the body," or that of beauty. Luang Da Maha Boowa, a famous teacher of repulsiveness meditation in Thailand, says of his own history of practicing concentration that continued practice eventually allowed him to see through the practice itself:

> As I kept focusing in, the image of unattractiveness standing there before me was gradually sucked into the mind, absorbed into the mind, so that I finally realized that repulsiveness was a matter of the mind itself. The state of mind which had fixed on the idea of unattractiveness sucked it in—which meant that attractiveness and unattractiveness

were simply a matter of the mind deceiving itself. Then the mind let go in a flash. It let go of unattractiveness. It understood now, because it had made the break. "This is how it's supposed to be. It's been simply a matter of the mind painting pictures to deceive itself, getting excited over its shadows. Those external things aren't passion, aversion, delusion. The mind is what has passion, aversion, delusion." As soon as the mind knew this clearly, it extricated itself from external affairs and came inwards . . ." (Maha Boowa 1988:120).

In this practice, abjection is necessary, and effective, but is neither fixed in nor originates from external forms. He describes the practice of seeing attraction and repulsion in external forms as ". . . a kind of madness, but while I was following the path, it was right, because that was how I had to follow it through" (1988:120). And yet, to only understand this as illusion would be "like criticizing food after you've eaten your fill" (1988:120). Even within the particular practice of *asubha kammaṭṭhāna* there is no stable nature to the medium.

Thus, we could say of image media that the "same" material imagery: 1) could serve as a demonstration of the clinical truth of anatomy to a doctor; 2) could make good sales for a pulp journalist or a U.S. shock film maker; 3) could represent the truth of suffering for a beginning meditator; or 4) for an advanced meditator is a picture painted by a mind deceiving itself that the abject itself is actually located in an object or a body. Kristeva's universalist assertion that the abject is everything that is most *not-I* is in the case of advanced meditation precisely the opposite of the state of affairs: the abject is precisely *not* an assault from without, and does not emanate from without however much that may seem to be the case. In this case the work with what may seem on first sight to be a negotiation with a "natural emotion," aversion to the abject, is not accomplished through "deadened nerves," nor through any other perhaps misinformed metaphor that posits a short-circuit interruption—by faulty media-conduits—of the connection between an objective truth of the body and a perceiver on the other, damaged, end.

For their soteriological purposes, the nuns and monks of Toong Temple seek out the *salod chai*, "let-down," of repulsiveness. Often, the crucial catalyst to acquiring the internal *kammaṭṭhāna* is viewing photographs of corpses. But the "truth" of these images is ultimately not located in the image. It is the graphic, gory detail which "sticks to the heart" (*did chai*), as the nuns put it when describing the initial steps in turning the attention toward that which this Buddhist pedagogy of visual images, and often Buddhist use of photography, leads. Ultimately the image realm of charnel ground may not be one of the physical eye, an organ contacting things in an outer visual field. And yet *asubha kammaṭṭhāna* can have a connection to mechanically reproduced visual objects, which do operate that way. In the most absorbing photographic, video, and cinematic perception, of course, outer physical sight is the primary mode of contact, and in that sense the material body of the viewers, themselves, are not or-

dinarily objects of attention. But this is not an inherent truth to the "nature" of such visual media. Photographic images of death, corpses, and the repulsiveness of the body can be exchanged in a constant relation to eidetic visions of the body. And though they do not consist of matter, nevertheless these *asubha* images lead to an intimate awareness, a seeing of the body in the body, a visceral reproduction in which, ultimately, *a copy of a body can be re-transformed and restored into an original: into a body once again.*

"I look deeply into the parts of the being," Mae-Chi Sa-ad says, "What do I see? I see from the scalp to the skull, all the way down. And then I contemplate, *na.* I contemplate the mind, let the mind stay put with the mind, let the mind *phicarana* [contemplate] *lohng* [sink down] to the feet. Go down and up, up and down . . . see my body, watch to see what this body really is for sure."

"In my tummy," she laughs, "what kinds of things are in there? I look throughout my parts. If the mind is calm or the mind is distracted, I simply make note of it, that's all. If the mind is quiet, the mind is buoyant. No pain or stiffness. When sitting, it's like . . . it's not as though our body is a body of ours . . ."

Then, after a pause, she says (with a tone something like awe, or reverence.) *"Cetanā khau yuu nai tua kaung man,"* The meaning of that statement is strange, almost ungrammatical in Thai, and phrased extremely enigmatically: the intentions of "her" are located in the body belonging to it, or, "The will of her resides within its body . . ."

Nuns like Mae-Chi Sa-ad are held in high regard at Toong Temple because they are believed to have realized something about this matter, in this case about the intensely personal matter of personal matter. And that is, that it isn't (ours). But they claim it is possible to face this fact squarely rather than be engulfed by it when the time of its most pressing manifestation comes, as it does for us all. According to this theory, while we may "know" these things about the body as not ours—as not under our control, ultimately unstable, and with a "will" of its own—that does not mean we realize it completely. It is for this reason that the nuns at Toong Temple dedicate themselves to acquiring this faculty of seeing born in intense states of concentration. Spending continuous moments, minutes, hours, days, weeks in meditation on repetitive and sensational images of the abject body, they access an image realm with profound impact on what they understand as a realization of *anicca*, "impermanence," and *anatta*, "no-self": in the body there never was anything present which could permanently keep it together, and nothing there which can ever be held to as "Self."

In contrast to dominant strains of media criticism, this imageric exchange operates on very different assumptions about the nature of what is real about "presence," because this transformed reproduction, passing through photography and into the body, is taken by the practitioners quite literally as an insight into the characteristic emptiness of bodily existence, rather than as a simulacrum. Or more precisely, we might say that a two-dimensional reproduction, which

divests the body of its physical aura, is re-envisioned into a materiality again, and yet that vision shows that there never was a stable, essential, physical presence to begin with.

On those rare occasions when a corpse is available for dismemberment, of course some of the nuns and monks do avail themselves of the multiple sensory attributes of a dismembered body. That this is useful is not in doubt. That bodily presence and multi-sensory embodiment are essential to the work of *asubha kammaṭṭhāna* should, however, be placed in great doubt, not only for its empirical contradiction in the practice of the nuns and monks at Wat Toong, but also for its theoretical supposition that the source of the abject is ultimately located in the matter of the body, if not also for its metaphysical belief that there is any thing at all that can ever be fully or finally present.

ARCHE-PHOTOGRAPHY

The power to shock, the power to evoke remembrance in imagination, and the power to capture the past in photography—not to mention capturing the very passing of time in film—these all comprise a medium of historical consciousness. People possess an ability to remember through that form of vision one might call inner seeing, which when very strong is sometimes metaphorized in English as "photographic memory." And people also possess an ability to access a realm of recall that is stilled in materialized visions, for surely in this day and age the world has a literal photographic memory as well. As time passes, and as the accumulation of documentary images of history at its worst piles up upon itself, this realm of eidetic memory has become a thickly sedimented ground for charnel images of the historical dead.

And yet there are many forces of history which work precisely by casting such deaths out as precipitately as possible, affording a deferral of those memories by means of continuous replacement of the shocking with new shocks (not to mention by means of all the other forms of media distraction). Moreover, all this can be true because at the same time the shocking power of death in material image is also an economic value, a field to sow profits within.

Perhaps, in a mechanically reproduced memory it may become easier and easier to behold images of greater and greater atrocity. The more gory and sensational the images become, the more gory and sensational they need to be, it seems, and in any case the chasms that may have seemed to have opened up between the sensorial suffering of victims, on one hand, and the bodiless viewers and acorporeal bodies on the mechanical screen, on the other, may smack more of a departure from a significant and meaningful contact than of a potential for liberation through imagery, such as Walter Benjamin (1968) for instance, had hoped for.

And yet, the problem of the divestment of "the aura of the object" was not a problem for Benjamin. Quite the opposite. In contrast to the line of argument outlined above, which is very much premised upon a metaphysics of presence,

Benjamin found something wondrous in the divestment of the aura: "For the first time—and this is the effect of the film—man has to operate with his whole living person, yet forgoing its aura. For aura is tied to his presence; there can be no replica of it" (1968:229). Now, it may seem easy to cry devil in the face of modern mechanical reproductions, and perhaps in some cases also correct to do so. As Martin Jay demonstrates, that would run into the stream of a long tradition of the "denigration" of sight, beginning when philosophers first woke up from naive assumptions about "the Noble sense," and continuing in the more recent critique of Western "ocularcentrism," getting contributions from intellectuals as diverse as Bergson, Foucault, Sartre, Irigary, Lacan, and Barthes, even to some degree Bataille and Derrida, and even reaching an extreme form among, of all things, film theorists such as Metz and his generation of *Cahiers du Cinema* writers (Jay 1993). But after all, if we only deride the dominance of visual imagery in our world, see it only as illusion to be unmasked, or essentialize it as a Western, modern, regime of ocularcentrism, perhaps that is something on the order of shaking a stick at a storm. The proliferation of mass-mediated visual culture has been accomplished. It is now counter-intuitive, and so intriguing, to note that at the dawn of the ascendance of this image sphere Benjamin harbored no metaphysics of presence for the image and rather saw something potentially liberating in the seeming negation of presence which mechanical reproduction represented for our senses. Is there, then, another dimension to two-sided mechanical reproductions, another side which, however compelling and true to life the critique of mass media may be, nevertheless defies it, and connects with that utopian hope Benjamin had concerning a radical altering of the relation between people and their world?

But it is easy to devolve from the aspiration for such a pedagogy of images into a hazy ontology of cinema consumption. There are also some theorists who would seize upon this filmic dimension as though it represented a way to transcend "modernity," and alienation, and restore a more natural relation to life. Take, for instance, the philosophy outlined in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's "Film and the New Psychology" (1964). Merleau-Ponty's position on vision in his essay on film, even though an affirmation of film, still shares many of the assumptions implicit in the critique of the hegemony of vision. As such, it serves to outline certain structures of feeling about "presence" that are particularly chronic and widespread. Though Martin Jay (1993) explains, almost convincingly, that Merleau-Ponty was not harkening for a mystical union with the natural senses, even Jay acknowledges the persistence of appeals in Merleau-Ponty body's of work to a "primordial sensorium prior to the differentiation of the senses" (1993:309). These are also quite common longings, at least implicitly, in much of contemporary social theory. In his book on vision and modernity, *Techniques of the Observer* (1990), Jonathan Crary states that the most crucial questions facing the critique of "an ongoing mutation in the nature of visuality" include "what forms are being left behind?" and "How is the body,

including the observing body, becoming a component of new machines, economies, apparatuses . . . ?" (1990:3). To that add Fredric Jameson's long, bewildered, yet incredibly articulate cry of vertigo over "hyperspace" in his book *Postmodernism* . . . (1991). It is not that far of a leap to devolve from these still historical yet credulously linear wonderings about loss and an implied affront to the human dignity of a previously less-alienated self, to the more generalized desires, still loitering in the more romantic wings of cultural anthropology, for an undifferentiated mode of being where all the violent, "modern," and "Western" distinctions, conceptions, notions, dualisms and dichotomies dissolve in a great mushy whole. About these "violent" differentiations: Merleau-Ponty, like many before and after him, attributes them originally to the intellectual disturbance caused by the dualism of Descartes. To this Cartesian differentiation of the senses he counters that "perception of the whole is more natural and more primary than the perception of isolated elements," and "should be considered our spontaneous way of seeing," as opposed to "the scientist who observes or the philosopher who reflects" (Merleau-Ponty 1964:49). "My perception is not a sum of visual, tactile, audible givens: I perceive in a total way with my whole being; I grasp a unique structure of the thing, a unique way of being, which speaks to all my senses at once" (1964:50). For him "being-in-the-world" is always already holistic, a matter of gestalts, "a being thrown into the world and attached to it by a natural bond" (1964:53). It is only by analytic error that we divide experience, segment ourselves, separate ourselves from the objects around us. And that is why it was for Merleau-Ponty, film, of all things, that undoes this modern and unnatural division. Film blends the senses, and re-presents us with the truth about perception. It is film which "directly presents to us that special way of being in the world" (1964:58). In film, just as in life, the world is pre-constructed, pre-existent, and causes its own perception (1964:53).

When Merleau-Ponty reflects upon "experience"—always after the fact (something he himself attributed to science, philosophical analysis, and Cartesian philosophy)—it appears as though existence is situated in an undifferentiated whole and continuum of being. That is how it appears to anyone who is merely thinking and remembering (as they are writing philosophy on how wrong philosophy is), about how it really feels to "be in the world," perhaps because it is one of the mind's many capabilities to reconstruct life in wholes and continua. It may even be more pleasant that way (I know I would rather be a continuous being-in-the-world than a sequence of fragments). But is experience given to us all in this form? For instance, does the approach to its observation change it in any way, or is "experience" completely separate from the act of observation?

Ironically, Buddhist meditation disciplines are often and wrongly considered to be similar to phenomenology because of what seems to be their valuation of

attention to experience "just as it appears." But in practice Buddhist meditators display attitudes toward "experience" that are very different than popular phenomenology. According to the Thai nuns of Toong temple, if one were to pay extremely intense attention to every moment (backed up of course by particular techniques, traditions and disciplinary tactics to sustain such observation from moment to moment such as informants report about meditation on the body), one might find that "being-in-the-world" is not so homogeneous after all. It may seem to be seamless while inattentively reflecting one's memory of "experience" in life as it is lived with relatively low awareness. But when paying careful attention, under conducive circumstances such as in reclusive meditation, practitioners report that it is not too difficult to see, for instance, that phenomena change from seeing, hearing, touching, thinking, back and forth in a most fragmentary and startling way. One's attention must be quick enough to pick this alternation up. Consider this analogy: the four blades of an electric fan (read: multiple senses), run at high speed, appear to be one continuous, whole, circle of matter, but when you slow them down, it may no longer look like one continuous entity.

According to Buddhist meditation theory, the magic of being operates by the fast succession of sensory occurrences, making it possible for one to cling to an atomic self-identity, in this case a "knower" of phenomena, where all that has happened is that phenomena *were there.* The "being there" is what Buddha labeled *viññā na,* usually translated as "consciousness" but better translated as something more like, simply, "presence" (Ñanavira 1987:103). Perception occurs when "there is" a sense-object, a sense-organ, and their contact ("there is" being *viññā na*). *Viññā na* depends upon this. When visual contact happens, for instance, there is eye *viññā na* (sight-presence). When auditory contact happens, *viññā na* is the there-ness of sound. When tactile contact happens, *viññā na* is the presence of a touch. When thinking happens (involving likewise a mind-organ, mind-object, and *viññā na*), *viññā na* is the presence of a mental event. Without *viññā na,* there can be no occurrence of phenomena, *i.e. they are not there,* such as when an unconscious person is kicked. In that case there is the sense-object (a boot), the sense organ (the nerve-receptors in the body), but no *viññā na* (no "consciousness," no actual there-is-ness) (Ñanavira 1987:103–6). Similarly, *and here's the rub,* there can be no consciousness, *viññā na,* without the other two elements. "Consciousness is always consciousness of something," as Sartre wrote (Sartre 1957:xi; cf. Ñanavira 1987:458).

As conscious experience happens, so rapidly from one contact to the next, it appears as though there is one person, or one *viññā na,* before which these various phenomena are appearing. But this is a magic trick. They are all different *viññā na:* eye-seeing-thereness, ear-hearing-thereness, mind-knowing-thereness, etc., occurring in rapid succession, too fast for an untrained attention to follow. There is no *viññā na* without some thing as its object. Yet it appears

as though *viññāṇa* exists independently of its objects. It seems as though presence, "consciousness," or "the knower," has its own independent existence before which these phenomena make their appearance.

Viññāṇa is the ultimate magic trick according to Buddhist meditation theory because what merely appears as "presence" or "there-ness," is instead taken to be "I-am-ness," taken to be self, thus feeding the fundamental conceit of the *presence* of the self, "I am." Somehow the simple "there-ness" that may occur in conjunction with things and sense-organs, by a sleight of hand is experienced as a presence of oneself, "I am," such as (the problematic) "*I* experience the world."

Quite reasonably for Merleau-Ponty, such alternations between the sensory happenings, if not perceived, are therefore not as real nor important as the holistic, gestalt experience of existence in sensory experience: a singular, holistic being-in-the-world. Through the phenomenological reduction, the apparent phenomena of a continuous being-in-the-world becomes the ground of the philosophically real, while any unperceived, "natural world" processes like the differentiated senses (or as the meditators see it, discontinuous fragments of "things that occur," as it were) are bracketed out of consideration, leaving only experience, supposedly, just as it appears to one. While this does make some sense logically—and here is the fundamental flaw—in fact in this case it is not "experience," just as it is, but a memory, reflection, and intellectual speculation which occurs after the fact that is taken to be an object of experience (ironically, precisely what Merleau-Ponty claimed to be overcoming). Paying attention to experience "just as it is"—if that is truly what one wants—presumably would require that one pay sustained attention, closely from moment to moment, and that would not be something easy or perhaps even possible to accomplish. But were one to marshal the discipline to try, the nature of "experience" may be different than when just remembering it. "It" may necessarily change the closer one gets to it, may necessarily appear differently with the speed and quality of the mindfulness that follows it. Experience, "just as it is," does not really exist, or if it can be said to exist in some sense, it does not until one can follow "experience" in close tandem with its occurrence, and then, necessarily, *it may not display the same characteristics you once thought you saw in it.* And that might be something of a *salod chai*, a let-down.

This is a critical emphasis necessary to understanding the difference between Buddhist meditation and popular phenomenology. If this sounds like a simple metaphysics of presence, or to be more precise, an out-presence-ing of Merleau-Ponty's metaphysics of presence, the one thing to remember here is that in the Thai meditation's attention to and mindfulness of the present, *there is no essential presence in presence.* And this is not a pleasant thing to discover. Merleau-Ponty is absolutely right in saying film is like life because, like "life," it depends for its appearances upon such blurred attention. The mind perceives a series of still film-frames, fluttered too rapidly by for anyone to be

mindful of their change from one to another, and so the mind experiences a life-like movement and seamless reality in film. In fact it is life-like above all because we already are cinema, because in life we also let sensory contacts pass by too rapidly to observe how they arise, linger, and pass away, and rather misperceive to a great degree just as Merleau-Ponty would have it.

And yet . . . there is nothing outside the film frame. Film may depend on erasing the gaps, the starts and stops, of the technological apparatus of projection, and just so the holistic version of being-in-the-world depends on a degree of inattention which makes the gaps between sensory phenomena invisible and unnoticed. Film may take the fundamental principle and illusion of life as a "being," and raise it to a new level of technological accomplishment. But perhaps that is precisely why it was in montage, juxtaposition, collision, and conflict that Benjamin formulated his hopes for a utopian power unleashed in the dialectical image. What can be so potentially startling, liberating, revolutionary about mechanical reproduction, is that not only can it take the illusion of the life-continuum and raise it to an extreme and ideal state, but then, as cinema, it can just as quickly dash itself against itself again, creating moments of shock-effect and fragmentary consciousness which in turn play back not only against the grain of film projection, but against a fundamental illusion of life itself, which cinema mimics. And it is this more fundamental rendering of life—which cinema copies by the very act of projecting its copies—which makes film also so potentially subversive on the most basic of levels, training the mind's eye to either generate or disperse the homogenous magic of being-in-the-world . . .

In an analogical sense, the outrageous, repellant ballistics of Dada of which Benjamin wrote in his Artwork essay (1968), the messy tactility and the desecration of auratic art, are not so completely unlike the aspect of *asubha*, repulsiveness, in Buddhist mediation on death. It is with this aspect of repulsiveness that the image realm of the charnel ground of the body opens up, disrupts, and offends the presence and magic of being. Contemplation of the revolting attempts to cut-through that aura of body and being which appears before the regard of beholding, to do it through means of an alternative aesthetics of repulsion, and for the sake of a sight no less intimate than the touch.

PROFANE ILLUMINATION

Walter Benjamin's enigmatic hope was for a secular, materialist gnosis of a nature and power analogous to religious revelation: a "profane illumination," which was, as Michael Taussig put it, "the single most important shock, the single most effective step, in opening up the 'long-sought image sphere' to the bodily impact of the 'dialectical image'" (Taussig 1994:207–8). In his famous analogy, Benjamin likened film to the contact of a surgical operation. The camera, discerned Benjamin, slices through reality like the surgeon penetrates the patient's body, "his hand moves among the organs . . ." (1968:233).

Benjamin placed the crux of the lever that would crack open the unawareness haunting over the material scene of modernity in the power of mechanical reproduction to divest material objects of their "aura." With respect to the work of art, this meant that the elite cult of art objects, and of artists, would give way under the pressure of a technology that could reproduce objects *ad infinitum*. As Eduardo Cadava (1995) has pointed out, "technical reproducibility" (what has in a mishap been translated as "mechanical reproduction") was for Benjamin a quality of all art objects, of any era, each of which represents a series of technological procedures performed on matter that is, theoretically, reproducible. What "mechanical reproduction" through film and photography (as well as through video and digital imaging for that matter) represents is not the eruption of a completely new phenomenon but the articulation and enhancement of what art already was. It is a rapid, dizzying expansion of reproducibility at such a pace and on such a scale that it appears to be a flash of the entirely new.

A technical reproducibility that can proliferate at such great speed and across great distances has the potential to undermine the bourgeois aesthetics of art consumption, an aesthetics which sees value in the physical presence of an object or original, rather than locating its value within the inherent reproducibility that the art object instantiates and which was always a technical potential inscribed in the making of it. By contrast, widespread and rapid technical reproducibility highlights rather than obscures what artistry already always was: the intervention of human action on the making of the world. Where elite art consumption required the acquisitions of high taste and a distanced, solitary contemplation of the art object by which spectators immerse themselves singularly and behold the work and its aura, submitting to the object, for Benjamin technical reproducibility would make art accessible, collective, plebeian, a mass-phenomena where the secret of human agency, of human making of their world, is raised to the level of the explicit and conscious. Presumably, this is a discovery which the ruling order, for obvious reasons, would not benefit from if popularized.

With respect to the work of film, Benjamin placed great faith in the distracting, repellant, and ballistic shock effects to empower this new politics of the aesthetic. But in this he unfurled a too-neat distinction between his idea and the fascist politics arising all around him. Fascism is a betrayal, he wrote, which gives satisfaction to an experience of violent destruction, "the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic" (1968:242). To this we must respond "by politicizing art" (1968:242).

The distinction between aestheticizing politics and politicizing art, ideologically speaking, is a quite meaningful one, making all the difference in the world. But in actual practice, the two tendencies have almost always arisen together, are almost always muddled and indistinguishable, as our everyday ex-

perience with media violence makes known to us. Aesthetic satisfaction in violent consumption, as well as in the way political realities come to be imbued by the aesthetic properties of the public image realm that "represents" them, is persistently powerful in this realm of mechanical reproduction because it represents a violence linked to what has become a *de facto* historical nature, "a new violence of perception . . . born of mimetically capacious machinery," as Taussig (1994:212) has put it (referring more to how things have actually turned out on balance, than to how they may yet come to be). Where Benjamin saw a new utopian hope in the surgical operations of the camera's expansions and contractions, its cuttings, tiltings, trackings, the operations in their actual history of practice have resonated more with the brutality that these tactics suggest than with the liberation they may have seemed to promise. The image realm opened up by mechanical reproduction has largely had this odor about it.

And yet, as Benjamin saw so clearly, we are already living in a dissected world of shock-effects—situated in it, oriented toward it, and constituted by it such that, under these sensory conditions, we may no longer be able to refuse the necessity of working in and with this strange realm of forms, the necessity of somehow finding a way to unlock the utopian potential of the image sphere, and discern the hair-trigger of dialectical tension and release between heightened presence of mind and social self-defense. Wrote Benjamin,

> The film is the art form that is in keeping with the increased threat to his life which modern man has to face. Man's need to expose himself to shock effects is his adjustment to the dangers threatening him. The film corresponds to profound changes in the apperceptive apparatus—changes experienced on an individual scale by the man in the street in big-city traffic, on a historical scale by every present-day citizen (Benjamin 1968:250n).

Given our historical situation, our fate hangs on a peculiar meat-hook, on the pointed contradiction between the absolute necessity that mechanical reproduction unleash the liberation-power of images, and the seeming impossibility that this image-realm will ever do so. Benjamin died just before the worst of modern barbarism manifested itself. And he missed the everyday, little, and creeping death which he foretold and which post-holocaust theorists have had ample occasion to observe: whereby images of death and violence, because they are carried in a mass delivery system that cultivates an appearance of autonomy, have the magical power to conjure up reflections of its images in reality. In other words, representations of violence and death have the power to produce real violence and death. The market of images absorbs into itself the nature of economic systems, and reality starts to conform to representations as though it was trying to accurately portray them. That was the great danger in the aestheticization of politics, what Benjamin perceived as the essence of Fascism, a force of aesthetic satisfaction in violence and taking pleasure in destruction, a spirit of Fascism which, if characterized so, certainly has not been kicked out

of our world but has, rather, seeped into it with the anonymous quiet of capillary proliferation. At the same time, more loudly and clearly in the realm of mechanical reproduction than anywhere else, that violent destruction has taken on tremendous economic value. Contrary to what Benjamin might have hoped, and as Adorno (1991), Buck-Morss (1994; 1997), Feldman (1994), and Taussig (1994) (to name only a few), have observed, it is perhaps the potential of mechanical reproduction to violently re-work perception that makes possible such monetary value. And this may enable people to take excessive profit and pleasure in death on a scale far beyond Benjamin's imagination. This violence of perception may cut death loose from its roots and allow it to circulate freely and harmoniously with the values of high-liberal economics.

Yet the practice of Thai Buddhist meditation on graphic imagery—on photographs even—shows us that in principle there remains a truth to the messianic potential that Benjamin saw, that this violence of perception is not foreordained in the technological nature of the medium, that mechanical reproductions do not necessarily *have* to have the hyperreality effect, but that they can have *precisely the opposite effect of everything that has been attributed to them.*

When incorporated into particular practices, image reproductions afford particularly powerful effects the range of which may be imperceptible to those with too radical a skepticism about vision or who shiver at the thought of photography. If these effects of meditation on corpse photography are possible, why not others? For instance, in Thailand, and in Asia generally, photography of the corpses of historic massacres are central to explicitly political rituals. These demonstrations of graphic photography in political memorials negotiate memory of the past with protest in the present, using photographic shock effects to seize control of vision and transfer the witnessing of past atrocity onto a seeing of the present condition (Klima n.d.). In any case, it is only this article's presentation of corpse meditation in the rather traditional anthropological form of alterity that may distract from the fact that there are multiple cultural arenas—ranging across everything from the cinema of political memory to the increasingly democratic camera-packing surveillance of previously "quiet" police brutality—in which the witnessing of suffering is delivered through abject imagery to deliberately ethical and political effect. Like Buddhist meditation on gory photographs, traces of the body in this imagery wander into our own form, and are scratched, however lightly or deeply, on our eyes. True, with an argument pinned strongly on a metaphysics of presence, one might be convinced that there is no genuine witnessing, that in the distanced voyeurism of visual media "you were not really there." But one has only to look carefully: if one was not there, then why are there flecks of the uncountable political murders one has witnessed still "sticking to the heart?" Just look.

In this, not even the most straightforward argument about the flatness of representation and the objectification of body imagery can be held stable, and the

"apparatus" is potentially subject to the human hand. In some sense, then, Benjamin must have been absolutely right about the liberation-powers of the image realm, though no one knows, completely, how to work them. And what thoughtful person could deny the absolute importance, at least, that he be right, if there is to be any hope?

What nags at this hope, what reminds us to remain in the relentless presence of the negative, is precisely the nature of the system that carries death away, that converts its value. Certainly with respect to visions in general and mechanical reproduction in particular, it is not technological nature in itself that makes the critical difference between a liberating power or a destructive violence. It must be a more fundamental problem: practices of relation to the images, which are ultimately inseparable from the form of social and political relations between ourselves. Concentration upon the image-realm arrives at this, the critical point, showing the necessity of a shift in attention: toward the fact that the effect of a cultural practice with images can go either way, theoretically, and yet seems to go mostly one way. The infinitely mutable practices for viewing corporeal images are narrowed by the condition of social relations in which they occur, but therefore these practices can likewise mutate the social itself, which is why Benjamin saw technical reproducibility as more than a highly efficient propaganda content-delivery system and rather as a form for social refabrication.

The problematic statement of Benjamin's—the distinction between the aestheticization of politics and the politicizing of art—makes all the difference in the world here. As Buck-Morss interprets that enigmatic, late addition to the art work essay, it was an argument not for art as communist propaganda, but a demand from art of "a task far more difficult—that is, to undo the alienation of the corporeal sensorium, to *restore the instinctual power of the human bodily senses for the sake of humanity's self-preservation,* and to do this, not by avoiding the new technologies, but by *passing through* them" (1997:377). Though I would suggest it is not entirely clear that the restoration of a lost, instinctual bodily experience is necessary to this movement, the critical idea Buck-Morss articulates here is this sense of "*passing through*" technologies of vision, a passage I would assert is entirely possible, because we never were not photographs. While far from participating in a knee-jerk reaction against new technologies for the production of aesthetic objects, one should still beware that political life itself can be rendered into such an object, a political "consummation of art for art's sake" such that humanity can, as Benjamin put it, "experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order" (1968:242).

Beholding the object of politics as art, as it unfolds and demands service in the pursuit of its form, is not so different a surrender than observing, dizzied, the transformations of technologies as though they contain within themselves a political identity and subject-hood. I would argue that it is a decidedly differ-

ent shift in attitude toward the proliferation of image reproductions—with the will if not confidence that these technologies are at least as malleable as we are—that is essential to a vigorous social critique, not to mention powerful visual practice. Certainly, the violence of media perception can and often does follow an aesthetic logic specific to its own historical force. And in some sense, or in all of our senses, we certainly may all be historical constructs, down to the bone. But "cultural construction" can often obscure our power and potential for . . . well, cultural construction. However true-to-life the critique of what flat and repetitive representation of deadly violence is doing to us, when its authority is too steeped in a metaphysics of presence this critique itself becomes a narrative of loss and nostalgia. Referring to an imaginary elsewhere of embodiment that once was but is now lost, or deferring to an "outside to the text," or eliciting desires for a reversal of an historical process that is not, practically speaking, reversible, can have the unintended conservative effect of encouraging an exit from the game, a withdrawal from engagement in the important task of making history through vision, leaving it to the political bad taste of the active "aesthetes" and in exchange for what may amount to little more than fleeting feelings of poignancy.

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