

Bergamo

On the Longevity of Pandemic Images

Erschienen in: Visual Literacy

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How is an image produced, how does it circulate and how does the storage, selection and distribution of an image solidify a certain iconography? In short: What turns an image into a cliché?¹ The noun “cliché” forms the past participle of the French *clicher*, “to click.” Within the context of photographic technique, “cliché” refers to negative images and thus traces the clicking sound of the camera’s release button which captures and records a visual impression.² Once this impression is imprinted on the film stock, it arrests time and space while simultaneously becoming easily reproducible in form and meaning. With the arrival of digital technology, technical images have entered an even faster matrix of accessibility, reproduction and distribution. Media artist and theorist Hito Steyerl calls these images “poor” in the double sense of the word, in that they are images of low quality and low budget alike.³ Drawing from that latter feature, Steyerl acknowledges a certain democratic potential of poor images insofar as they can be produced, shared and appropriated by a general public and, in the same vein, interfere with the *sensus communis*. Even though she holds that the poor image is able to create “visual bonds,” she reckons that “it is about defiance and appropriation just as it is about conformism and exploitation.”⁴ Despite being a product of popular as much as of consumer culture, for Steyerl the poor image still remains the most valuable defense mechanism against manipulation by visual media and the most promising strategy to provide a more or less plausible representation of reality.

Hence, the fast-paced and ever-changing exposure to such “poor images,” in other words the breathlessness of visual literacy today, simultaneously suggests the creation of new forms of readability and interpretability. More often than not, the erratic nature of digital image circulation has a counterintuitive effect and turns out to be less a matter of targeting specific audiences (think: images of aluminum hats meant to trigger affirmative responses with conspiracy theorists). Rather than automatically generating their own specific iconicity, digital images set in motion semiotic chains that prove to be as multifaceted as the utter contingency of their production and circulation. They thus gain specific value only over time and by means of their constant reproduction. In her essay *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), Susan Sontag examines the appeal of atrocity photographs and notes that the elasticity of the impact an image is able to trigger increases with the sense of urgency, scandal or crisis it conveys:

[I]n a culture radically revamped by the ascendancy of mercantile values, to ask that images be jarring, clamorous, eye-opening seems like elementary realism as well as good business sense. How else to get attention for one's product or one's art? How else to make a dent when there is incessant exposure to images, and overexposure to a handful of images seen again and again? The image as shock and the image as cliché are two aspects of the same presence.⁵

Following Sontag's argument of a reciprocal shock and cliché effect in photography, I will have a closer look at an image that was taken by flight attendant Emanuele di Terlizzi on March 18, 2020, in Bergamo when the Italian city became the European epicenter of the Covid-19 pandemic. Immediately after he shared the image on social media, the photograph rose to fame on international broadcasting platforms and the world wide web.⁶ A shock as much as a cliché, di Terlizzi's picture will serve as my case in point to explore the genuine potential of digital images to be suspended between the two opposing poles of gratuitous snapshot and historical icon.⁷



A global crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic may help us understand how periods of severe political, economic or medical instability tend to give rise to significant numbers of iconic images. Such images evince the allure of readily discernable symbols, promising to provide a temporary surface for identification, or, in other words, a harmonious unity of form and content in an otherwise chaotic environment. During the haze of the coronavirus outbreak, the evocation of “the images of Bergamo” coined a *topos* long before the transmission of aerosols and the daily dose of infection rates translated into nifty pie charts and bar graphs on the frontpages of major news outlets. Over time, it seemed one got used to staring at the hidden virus, made visible in the shape of a spiky ball. Jean-Luc Nancy has assessed this failure of familiar epistemologies in the face of the coronavirus:

We are [...] discovering to what point the living being is more complex and less comprehensible than our previous representations of it led us to think, and to what extent the exercise of political power [...] is another form of complexity, one that is also less comprehensible than it seems.⁸

Indeed, at the very beginning, the implementation of specific strategies to visualize the unassimilability of a global health crisis proved challenging: How to apprehend a virus whose steadfast spreading remained imperceptible to the human eye? Instead, we were gazing at blue skies without contrails or foxes and boar returning to the city parks as people remained indoors. Yet what seemed at first to be dystopian scenarios hardly came as a surprise in an age where climate change increasingly overturns environmental principles. The impressions of empty museums, cinemas, restaurants or shopping malls replaced one evil with another, making the void of cultural and economic disarray the equally hollow substitute for an invisible virus.

As art historian Sarah Elizabeth Lewis wrote in an opinion piece for the *New York Times*: “Visualization is a powerful tool – it can help us more deeply understand the severity of the situation as we work to curb the virus. But the visuals we need most in this time are difficult to come by.”⁹ Lewis bemoaned the lack of photographs showing those who died of Covid-19 and asked for images that “humanized clinical statistics,”¹⁰ while the blurry contours of escalating infection rates and death tolls on the one hand and the invisibility of isolated patients in agony and distress on the other were sharpened by one image in particular. A snapshot taken on a smartphone in Bergamo, Italy, a region that was severely shaken by the outbreak of the virus from the very beginning, was amongst the first images to convey the collapse of public health systems during the coronavirus crisis. Interestingly enough, what came to be known in European and largely also North American broadcasting as “the images of Bergamo,” plural, was in fact only a single photograph. On March 18, 2020, Emanuele di Terlizzi took the picture while looking down from his balcony in a housing complex in Northern Bergamo. The image shows a convoy of 9 military vehicles, transporting, as was later revealed, the corpses of patients who had died of Covid-19 to crematoria outside of Bergamo. The local government had just issued a ban on traditional inhumation burials, causing an overflow of bodies at the Bergamo crematorium.¹¹

The snapshot which di Terlizzi caught of the transport can be considered a catastrophic image: Firstly, the picture contains a number of disturbing blind spots. Framed in a way that cuts off half of the first and last truck respectively, the visual focus lies on a row of gleaming lights on the upper right corner. Almost blinding, the image suggests invisibility rather than providing visual evidence. Art historian Frank Fehrenbach considers the horror of this particular image less a result of *what* it shows but rather the fact that it shows very little.¹² Indeed, the cropped edges almost immediately call upon the imagination of the beholder. Due to the restricted viewpoint of the photograph, what in fact was later confirmed as a convoy of 13 vehicles in total appears like an endless chain. The catastrophe thus spills over from the formal characteristics of the photograph to its content, creating a totalizing effect. Art historian Jörg Trempler has noted how, very much in general, every catastrophic image not only represents a traumatizing historical caesura but also bears the catastrophe from within, marking a turning point in established mimetic patterns and medium conventions.¹³ As far as di Terlizzi's photograph is concerned, it partly operates more like a text than an image. The linearity of the convoy suggests a consecutive rather than focalized direction of reading, a flat image composition that dismantles conventions like the golden ratio.¹⁴ However, the train of vehicles runs counter to the notation of the Latin alphabet and consequently undermines habitual practices of reading texts as well.¹⁵ With the major line of orientation crossing the image slightly above its diagonal, the image lacks the traditional demarcation points of visual representation and, in consequence, elicits unfamiliarity and unease in the visual spectrum. In a second step, the inadequate framing sets verticality and horizontality at odds with one another, further reinforcing the shadiness of the unexpected military mission. Accordingly, a scenario that would better be depicted in a horizontal format typical of landscape painting is squeezed into the verticality of the smartphone screen.¹⁶ Prompting the impression of portraiture instead of landscape, the vertical orientation of di Terlizzi's device causes a disproportionate rendering of the image content and, despite the constant influx of selfies and headshots in the vertical universe of social media, lacks any trace of human presence. The current ubiquity of the portrait mode adds to the uncanniness of the image as we try to make sense of the brutal force of the military trucks juxtaposed with neatly parked cars in front of a residential housing complex, a scenario devoid of human interaction and dipped into the nocturnal blurriness of car lights and streetlamps. Hence, even though the framing of this picture is vertical, it remains "boundlessly horizontal,"¹⁷ calling for answers to the many questions it leaves in the open.

Di Terlizzi's photograph rightfully points to the lack of reliable data concerning effective protection against and treatment of Covid-19 at the time, a lack which caused the Italian government to order the unreserved cremation of every deceased patient, a military operation surreptitiously executed at night. While di Terlizzi's photograph managed, at least in part, to uncover the government's proceedings, it still left the false impression of an infinite chain of vehicles and corpses, setting in motion the imaginary of an absolute catastrophe without remedy. As a result, the photograph became iconic with regard to the visualization of death by Covid-19. When di Terlizzi posted the image on his Instagram account, Bergamo was already at the brink of an infrastructural collapse. In

his post, he speculated about the possibility that the Italian military may have hastily tried to build an emergency hospital outside of Bergamo, yet his image took its own course: It proliferated, infected its viewers and “went viral” as jargon has it.¹⁸

Obvious as it may be, the jargon of virality is noteworthy in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. As mentioned above, the breathless surplus of image circulation in the digital age suddenly yielded to a scarcity of visual displays of the unfolding global health crisis. It took some time for the images of emergency rooms, intensive care units and crowded morgues to appear on our dominantly vertical screens. “A change in quantity can lead to a change in quality, and the history of information overload is an important backdrop for understanding our moment’s difficulty in finding truth,” as media historians Kenneth Cmiel and John Durham Peters write.¹⁹ Here, I should add that this difficulty of judging the veracity of a photograph like di Terlizzi’s manifested itself in various other misinterpretations of snapshots similar to his. An image which was similarly cropped in a highly suggestive manner, the drone photograph of Hart Island in New York City, for instance, spread the rumor of a sheerly unimaginable number of bodies for which there was no longer any space at the morgues and graveyards in the city. In fact, those buried on the island were no different from the ones who were laid to rest there before, namely the homeless and poor unable to afford a proper burial as well as those dying alone without any relatives.²⁰

I reckon that the tendency of these viral images to be misleading on a formal level and, in turn, their affinity to spread misinformation, is not so much a matter of ignorance, and maybe even less the effect of confusing visual information. Instead, and however contingent images may be, they often confirm a certain bias vis-à-vis what they show. In other words, something which we have always seemed to know enters the scope of visual evidence. On that account, the specific case of di Terlizzi’s photograph speaks of the irreducible truth of death, a truth that is unfathomable to every single individual, yet precisely because of its alleged irrepresentability insists all the more on a proper depiction. We all want to comprehend death and we all would like to know why, how and to what extent our life may be at risk.²¹

Coming back to the dynamics of cliché building, di Terlizzi’s snapshot, in my opinion, marks the transitional moment from suggestion to confirmation (of death). In the longer run, a productive exercise may consist of keeping the focus precisely on this transitional moment when the unwatchable enters the field of vision. Alenka Zupančič has described the unwatchable not so much as an instance of political incorrectness or as a breach of conduct. Considering our example, what is at stake is thus less the question of whether it is unethical to publicize images of those who have died or are dying of the virus. Instead, Zupančič defines the unwatchable as an instance in which “something that ought not (do so) melts into visibility.”²² Her definition not only refrains from stipulating a moralistic impossibility, it also emphasizes the subjective, ontological incapacity to imagine the revelation of something which simply cannot be, yet very much frames our existence. In light of Zupančič’s argument, I suggest reading the images produced during the Covid-19 pandemic, no matter how unwatchable they may be, as clichés:

Trying to apprehend an incomprehensible virus over and over again, they let the invisible enter the field of vision without simply becoming spectacular. For that matter, we should avoid dismissing the critical potential of the catastrophic images picturing the early days of the pandemic and keep in mind that they contain a recording of knowledge formation and community building, at times even of social inequity. What makes di Terlizzi's "poor image" and many others so astoundingly rich is that they embrace the invisible as the condition of the visible. A pandemic image, by definition, is an image of the commons.

References

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20. Fehrenbach: Das Bild aus Bergamo. I would like to thank my student Arielle Friend for recounting one of the most truthful images of the non-democratic nature of the virus which hit underprivileged parts of society much harder than others. Friend observed that shortly after the first major outbreak of the virus, piles of worn-out furniture started rotting on the sidewalks in front of social housing complexes in certain parts of Brooklyn, the Bronx and the greater NYC area, a clear indication of the many people who died alone, deprived of any health care or social support.
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