17

The Power of the Picture:

Penetration of the Real

on YouTube

Bojana Romic

This chapter points out some of the effects that social media have on their audiences through an analysis of the YouTube clip recording the death of 26-year-old Iranian Neda Salehi Agha-Soltan. She was shot in the chest and bled to death on a Tehran street on the third day of demonstrations following the controversial presidential elections in Tehran in June 2009. Her last moments were recorded by a passerby and the video was immediately posted on YouTube, causing intense international reactions from news media and individuals worldwide. Neda, as she simply became known as the icon of the Iranian protests, was shot and killed by a plainclothes member of the Basij militia, the Iranian paramilitary force. By definition, any platform that supports user-generated content with loose restrictions regarding the graphic content (see: YouTube Terms of Service), may occasionally serve as a messaging device for the voice from the (distant) Other. Raw pieces of information, unmediated and *potentially* instrumentalized within the narrative of broadcast media, offers an alternate view to the political context in

Figure 17.1. The family of Neda Agha-Soltan released this picture of their slain daughter to the news media after an iconic photograph of a live Iranian woman wearing a hijab with a similar name was published worldwide. (Riordan, 2009).

question. Given the fact that social media are consumed separately from the broadcast information (although there is a mutual influence), its role in the global information economy grows progressively (Blossom, 2009, p. 65) and covers broad target group of consumers. Another important aspect lies in YouTube's archival capabilities, and makes the content visible for an increased amount of time (Alexander, 2011, p. 43).

GOALS, METHODOLOGY, AND LITERATURE

Within the stated frame of reference, this case study will analyze several aspects:

- the layers of meaning derived from the picture of recorded death
- Iconization and production of a *hero*, and
- YouTube as the platform that presents the information from the Other.

As a result, the connection between the iconic images present in Western cultural heritage and this particular clip may become more clear – which, apart from the obvious context – might be one of factors that contributed to its overall impact on its audiences.

Until the video of Neda's death appeared on YouTube, the general public knew nothing about her. Soon after the video appeared, she was immediately conferred martyr status by the international news media, which portrayed her as a heroine in the historic struggle for democratic elections in Iran. In other words, it seemed to be a clear example of social media serving as a "discursive machine," producing a number of ideological patterns, thus giving a clear example of the informational dynamics supported by it.

YouTube had previously featured a number of other videos of the Tehran demonstrations – most of them showing the riots and the urban landscape – taken by mobile phone cameras and accompanied by the dramatic voices of the protesters. However, this short clip, now known as "The Neda video" was particularly moving and initiated a wave of moral outrage, discussion and public interviews. Surely one of the most intriguing was an interview with U.S. President Barack Obama who acknowledged that he saw this video himself, describing it as "heart-breaking."

There is no intention in this work to examine the background of the political struggles in Iran, nor is the religious context considered – the focus here is the iconic representation in relation to the medium chosen to *send the message."*

Aspects of this iconic video will be examined using the concept of *studium* and *punctum*[1] by Roland Barthes, the "Gift of Death" by Jacques Derrida, the "accident museum" by Paul Virilio, and reflections on the notion of "Neighbor" by Slavoj Žižek.

DISCUSSION OF THE VIDEO

From the outset, this was a political video. It might even be said that it was made with the *idea* of carrying a political message. More importantly, however, is the determination of the internal and external resources of the clip that provided the opportunity for later contextualization in the media. It is obvious that such video material could serve well as an illustration of the repressive Iranian regime. Yet, it has a surplus value, an internal resource in terms of mere visual power, which may be one of the reasons for such a huge response from individuals on the Net, leaving aside the way it was instrumentalized in the media. It is well known that scenes of political violence presented in photography, film and television have a long history. Still, most of them have had little success in creating the discursive machine around them. They often served just as an illustration, a studium image with no internal power.

Numerous pictures and videos that are the result of a journalistic portrayal of war, riots and violence share a similar approach in terms of visual setting. Even without a professional knowledge of the rhetoric of the particular genre, the average consumer can discern a certain visual pattern that connects images from riots occurring at geographically distant locations or different moments in recent history. When comparing images from protests in Prague in 2000 and Washington in 2007 at the picture level they are almost identical. Most of these were taken by professional journalists. However, in recent years many amateur clips have appeared as the best and often only recording of a disturbing news-worthy event. The most famous example is, of course, the amateur recordings of the World Trade Center attack of September 11, 2001. However, before that, amateur video of white police officers allegedly using excessive force on Rodney King in 1991 after a high-speed chase was carried by American television stations in the pre-YouTube era. The subsequent acquittal of the policemen in 1992 ignited a week-long riot in predominantly black areas of south-central Los Angeles, resulting in 53 deaths and millions of dollars of property damage (Harvey-Lintz & Tidwell, 1997).

Amateur shots seem to offer a new kind of iconographic power of the picture, but the question is, where this power comes from? Is it due to the authenticity of the event? Is it merely a low tech approach? Or is it simply the fact that they have captured the right moment, where actually seeing the event is the main objective? It
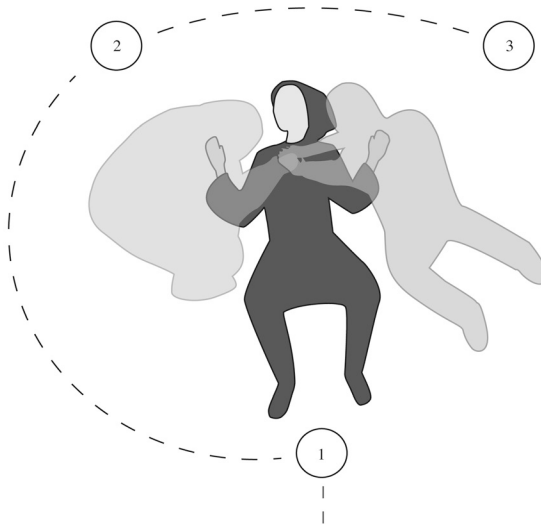
Figure 17.2. This picture reconstructs a citizen reporter's movement around the body of Neda Agha-Soltan as he shoots the video that eventually is posted on YouTube. Illustrations by Bojana Romic.

seems that these clips with all their buzz and hum, shaky pictures and interference, have changed the visual syntax of this genre – the lack of a stable picture and good quality equipment have affected the new visual code.

The Neda video is another example of the phenomenon. The video can be divided into three phases, for which the sketch below in Figure 17.2 might serve as a convenient guide:

- The approach: The citizen journalist rushes to Neda as she lies on the pavement after she was shot, position No. 1. Two persons frantically try to stop the bleeding from her chest. Only the lower part of her body is visible. Her legs are splayed and bent at the knee. She is wearing jeans under the *abaja*.

- The reporter circles behind the first person's back and comes to the position No. 2 on the picture. Neda's face is clearly visible now – she gazes calmly upward, ostensibly detached from her surroundings, while people around her are struggling to keep her alive. The next moment marks the *punctum* of this video – she shares her gaze with the camera for a moment or two.

- The reporter circles in position No. 3 behind the back of another person who has arrived to help. The camera's focus is on Neda's left profile, as the blood

runs down her face. Neda is dead.

Despite Neda's death being the result of an aggressive act, the life struggle she is experiencing is not visible; her face shows no sign of pain; and there are no involuntary bodily movements. Instead, she leaves an impression of serenity in stark contrast to the confusion and panicking people around her. Indeed, she is reminiscent of the figures of religious martyrs in medieval paintings or frescoes, their souls at peace; and several other scenes from the video evoke the situational settings of pieta-style artwork. Once again, it is a representation of the optical unconscious and visual paradigms that have moved from art history into popular culture: the peaceful gaze of a dying St. Sebastian is replaced with the image of the passion of Jeanne D'Arc in Carl Dreyer's film. Both characters are represented as having been lifted into a higher dimension of reality, a state of mind that elevates them from their surroundings. In terms of visual setting, there is a strict barrier between the position of the (passive) audience and the institution of the martyr, who is contextualized through a cultural message, "the gift of death." In the painting, the victim's eyes are raised skyward to the heavens. The clip of a dying Neda follows the same visual modality.

Within the given context, the reporter finds himself in total control. The victim, who lies still in front of him, is *givenness*, enabling him to create the *Event*. For that reason, he is situationally placed as the *owner of the gaze*. Conversely, the victim is being watched, showing no sign of interaction. The technological prothesis erases the reporter's embodiment – he is fully reduced to the mediated gaze. This work was designed to carry a political message. The process of making the video represented a political act. Within these circumstances, the narrative is fashioned. Although the reporter is an amateur, he follows the classic pattern in making the video. His duty is to offer a transparent record of the *given* and he therefore attempts to take a shot of the dying person's face, revealing her identity, which is the first step in the process of shifting her from being an object of the gaze toward *subjectification* of a nameless victim. At this point, things take an unexpected turn; her eyes meet the camera lens. Through this process of her *subjectification*, the audience is being turned into the object – the moment that could be addressed as the *penetration of the Real*. Jacques Derrida notes:

> It is only to the extent that this *identity* of the oneself is possible and irreducibly different singularity that death for the other or the death of the other can make sense (1995, p. 45).

She breaks through the boundary between the object of the gaze and the privileged position of the reporter: he becomes embodied and revealed, with no further possibility to hide behind the barrier of technology that naturally conceals itself (Bolter & Grussin, 2000). The reporter becomes a messenger, approved by the sub-

ject in front of the camera. As Roland Barthes notes in his unfinished essay "Right in the Eyes":

> [T]he gaze cannot be neutral, except to signify neutrality; and if it is vague, the vagueness is obviously full of duplicity; but this core is surrounded by a halo, a field of infinite expansion, in which meaning overflows [. . .] the "mystery" of the gaze, the disturbance which constitutes it, is obviously situated in this "overflow" zone (1991).

This halo produces an interpretative knot: while her inability to speak and react in any way other than looking into the camera creates the place of trauma. According to Barthes, "trauma is a suspension of language, the blockage of meaning" (1977, p. 30). For that reason, the gaze is just enough here for the political statement – it destroys the mythical element in the situational setting, and is an attempt to escape cultural coding. In this context, with whom does this gaze communicate, and for what purpose? This is a situation that instantly creates an ideological seam, as it offers a vacant space for later favorable interpretations in the media: Neda transitions from the position of victim to the position of martyr. But this new form of identity is possible only on condition and through the process of victimization: "The identity of oneself is *given* by death; by the being-toward-death that *promises* me to it" (Derrida, 1995, p. 45). Therefore, the ultimate ireplaceability of a dying person shows the paradox of "the gift of death" within the context of a tragic public event: the same bizarre auto-reflexivity that produced the identity, also created that empty halo ready to be filled with meaning.

camera (*punctum* moment), and engaging the subsequent viewers of the video.

MEDIATED DEATH ON YOUTUBE

Just after the World Trade Center attack on September 11, 2001, one of the first clips that publicly appeared (and was later removed) was a blurry shot of a person jumping from one of the skyscraper tower's window just after the explosion. That person, in an instant, chose the type of death he found more preferable, that his body would be broken rather than burned or suffocated. It represented the ultimate freedom of will, the final – and ultimate – decision of his life. In an era marked by the highly aestheticized spectacle of death on film and in video games in a triumph of high-definition simulacra (an example of this is the recent proliferation of TV criminal science investigation (CSI) series where most of the scenes take place in a forensic laboratory), the "real" death of a person represents a *glitch* in the system, a true penetration of the Real.

It brings to mind the example Barthes analyzed in *Camera Lucida*: the young political prisoner awaits execution, handcuffed in his cell. What Barthes marks as a *punctum* is the knowledge that photography freezes the moment in past-future: he is dead and he will die. His death has happened, and is just about to happen, over and over again. This is the characteristic of photography, even more present in a YouTube video – the possibility of re-enactment, both the traumatic happening itself and the recipient's emotional response toward it. Both aspire to save the event from oblivion, and so function as a kind of archive.

As most of the population comes in contact with this horrifying event through the video format, the local becomes downplayed by the omnipresent video clip. It is not only a historical documentation of the event; it gains another layer of meaning as an iconic symbol, with its existence on a video platform that might even become divorced from the original event. With the arrival of YouTube, the horizontal space axis finally merges with the vertical time axis; all the videos gain the same, equal status within the endless archive and the same interface.

But there is another aspect – defined by Paul Virilio as "The Accident Museum" (2000). Through the simulation industry, a new form of war is practiced. In some cases, the "virtual" may penetrate the "real," as a result of a removal from the consequences of embodiment (Hayles, 2001, p. 17). According to Virilio, the military spectacle creates the anti-museum of accident simulation, reversing the relationship to exposure, the exhibition, testing *what cannot be*. Through the proliferation of various images, this brutal post-spectacle replaces the localized museum, which

> lost its museographic appeal, in favor of an exposure time, [. . .] a *landscape of events* that would thus replace the former exhibition hall, an architectural space disqualified on the one hand by its orthogonal geometry, and on the other by the requirements of an urgent screening of the phases of the accident (2000, p. 59).

YouTube, therefore, may be perceived as a digital anti-museum, an "independent carrier"of video data, or the passage through which self-contained information may pass.

The same platform that archives all types of amateur videos, from personal v-logs to entertaining remixed Bonnie Tyler songs, serves here for the ultimate Web 2.0 broadcast of content coming from the Other. As Manuel Castells noted, the network society indicates increasing tension and distance between personality and culture, individuals and communes (2004, p. 82-93): video clips that serve as a medium that mediate the political struggle and turn it into a visual narrative, emphasize the discrepancy between different physical locations through these pieces of reality as represented. At the same time, spatial editing (Manovich, 2001) on YouTube platform juxtaposes the clips that follow the same sub-genre, which flatten the visual information into a "fiber of textuality" that deepens the gap between the local and the distant Other. The Neda video serves as a mediated voice from the (distant) crowd.

The fact that YouTube is available 24/7, avoiding the linear narrative model present on television, brings the notion of *authenticity* to viewers. They see the full, unedited clip, with no textual interpretation, no polished piece of news. The only interface that mediates the information is the neutral YouTube interface. So when it comes to a recorded clip of a dying person, it seems that YouTube offers an intermediacy that is not possible via the broadcast media – there is no contextual barrier between the clip and a viewer, or, to use Michael Heim's metaphor, the viewer becomes *immersed* in the online content. If every piece of visual information is just a click away, it makes a powerful tool for spreading the message and reaching a broader audience. From that point of view, the position of the YouTube spectator can be compared with the first spectators of Lumière's short film "Arrival of the train at La Ciotat station" (1895). It caused the audience in the cinema to jump from their seats, as it seemed that the train was traveling toward them. Here again, the eye eliminates the screen, the barrier between the mediated event and the spectator's body. What makes the difference between the first film audience and a regular cinema audience later on is the *sensual puzzle* to which the first spectators were exposed: it brought an *aura* of authenticity and closeness, so their reaction was purely instinctive and emotional. The experienced eye of today's film spectator has clear knowledge of the spectacle he or she is exposed to, which is a radically different position. On the other hand, the YouTube spectator who knows, or believes he or she knows about the authenticity of the event, still experiences the same emotional trigger. That is why, after being exposed to so many images, the feeling of empathy with the unfortunate people shown on the screen is still very powerful. In the words of Slavoj Žižek:

[. . .] although our power of conceptual thinking has developed immensely, our emo-

tional-ethical responses remain conditioned by age-old instinctual reactions of sympathy to suffering and pain that is witnessed directly. This is why shooting someone point-blank is for most of us more repulsive than pressing a button that will kill a thousand people we cannot see (2008, p. 43).

The position of a telepresent spectator of the tragic event shares much in common with that of the witness of an accident such as a car crash – the individual experience of looking is accompanied by the opposite experience of belonging to the arbitrary group of other people present

> by individualizing the experience of spectating, when conversely it is an experience *in* and *as* part of a crowd, the spectator remains just a disembodied gaze, as opposed to a member of a gathering, the *man in the crowd* who refuses to be alone (Littau, 2003, p. 35-52).

In the case of the Neda video and through YouTube, a whole YouTube community is put in the position of a member of such a crowd, through the process of mediation. As John Fiske noted, giving the example of the *I Witness Videos*:

> People with video cameras are often present when disasters occur, whereas news crews typically arrive afterward [. . .] their lower-quality images, poor but closely involved vantage points, moments of loss of technical control (blurred focus, too-rapid pans, tilted or dropped cam-eras), and their reduced editing all serve to reveal the discursive control that official news exerts over the events it reports. *Videolow* shows that events can always be put into discourse differently from *videohigh*, and it enhances its sense of authenticity (1998, p. 383-392).

Yet the notion of authenticity is always chimeric to a certain extent. This argument does not problematize whether a certain occurrence did or did not happen – it is about the *way* it is presented. YouTube as an archival platform and the amateur video should not be taken for granted. That is why the Neda video was *made* to carry a political message – not because the passerby could possibly have had any idea about what was about to happen during the late afternoon demonstration in Tehran on June 20, 2009. Instead, the point is that YouTube contextualizes content in a certain manner – once the video is uploaded, it gains another layer of meaning: the *notion* of truth. YouTube, too, has a representation policy, just like the broadcast media. If its role as a "carrier of independent information" is taken into consideration, the promise of truthfulness and authenticity is one of its strongest weapons. Not to forget, any piece of recorded information is always limited within the boundaries of the subjective viewpoint. There is no such thing as neutral, informative recording of a tragic event.

In any event, all the hybrid Web 2.0 platforms offered a place for discussion, comment and interaction. In the case of the Iranian elections, Twitter played as im-

portant a role as YouTube (*Washington Times,* 2009). The networked community outside the local context may not entirely follow the thread but they do represent the mediated bodies of dissent, men of the [networked] crowd who refuse to be alone.

IMPLEMENTATION OF MEANING

After the Neda video appeared on YouTube, its content was heavily reworked by media. Here is one example: an article written by Randy Cohen in *The Ethicist* section of the *New York Times* magazine, titled "Neda, Obama and the Power of Pictures" (2009). The text was accompanied by the picture on a placard exhibited in front of the Iranian Embassy in London. The image shows the face of a dying young woman, her frozen gaze staring above the horizon. The face is printed in black and white on a green background, in a cut-out technique, obviously imitating the well-known portrait of Che Guevarra – the image of the ultimate rebel, an iconic paradigm for the revolutionary. Its massive popularity set a certain standard for visual representation in this category, a paradigm that is above the question of race, gender and religion.

Another key aspect is that Neda's face shows an exquisite physical beauty, which personalized the Iranian struggle for the international news media. The revolution had a face. As concern about Neda's murder rose, *The New York Times* online magazine published a banner in the right-hand column, showing her image and the question: "Who is Neda Agha-Soltan?" In the photograph, a young woman gazes calmly at the camera. It seems to be a photograph for an identity document, but it was cropped in a manner often used in fashion photography, showing her face only. Not knowing the context, one might think this young woman was a show business celebrity, or a model. The question follows the approach often used in a teasing-advertising campaign, so the target group will become sufficiently interested in a product that they will search for the answer. This is an example of how classic advertising campaigns may serve to produce meaning in an entirely different context. A hero is born.[2]

An advantage for her promotion in the media was the fact that she had no background in political activism. Although very well educated, Neda lived a simple life, working in a tourist agency. While not directly active in politics, she attended the protest because she wanted to offer her support, according to press reports. The sniper who shot her dead had no particular reason to target her.

However, the very fact that global audiences had limited access to her iconic image showed the other side of social media: with the same velocity that the picture of Neda's death spread via the Internet, another image was widely disseminated as well – the picture of a head-scarfed Neda Soltani, a teacher at Tehran University.

Her Facebook profile picture was mistaken for Neda-Agha Soltan, and the picture was misappropriated by posters to fill out the visual narrative of a martyr for the cause. Soltani was forced to leave Iran because of governmental harassment and has since sought asylum in Germany (Abadi, 2010).

This information is important because it is clear that Neda's personality was open enough for the later implementation of a set of meanings. Once again, Neda makes a perfect heroine, exploited and victim-mized even in death. The first information that the global media got to know about her was that she was a victim of the Ahmadinejad regime. All that followed was just a footnote to the story.

For quite some time, the Muslim context was presented as the Other in the Western media, in a rhetoric that portrayed two opposed, yet relatively coherent sides. Neda's case portrays a local conflict, made for the eyes of global – particularly Western – audiences. Through the Neda video, Muslim Otherness was translated into a familiar language – it offered a dialogue through pictures. Thus, YouTube and Twitter provided a quick glimpse of the context behind closed doors. If Iranians use the U.S.-based Twitter as a platform for internal communication in a very risky political atmosphere to fight their local government, from the Western perspective they are no longer just the Other; they have become what Žižek defines as "Neighbors."

It was not the first time that YouTube had served as a platform offering a peek at riots and political disturbances that were supposed to be local and hidden from global audiences: examples abound, such as, the Burmese demonstrations of 2007; continued Chinese prosecution of the outlawed Falun Gong; the Arab Spring of 2011, and the Syrian clampdown in 2012; and, more recently, the Al Qaeda-inspired attacks on U.S. Embassies in Egypt and Libya on the anniversary of 9/11 in 2012. From that point of view, there is no "forbidden city" anymore and no invisible place.

CONCLUSION

Regardless of the refined simulacra techniques whose aim is to reproduce the "notion of authenticity," the penetration of the Real always shakes the system. The Neda video posed a number of questions. On the ideological level, it showed the power of amateur video to disseminate a political message, offering a close encounter with a victim of violence caused by state repression; on the picture level, it again offered a close encounter with the moving knowledge that the person who died so peacefully in front of the camera was unarmed, a victim of state-sponsored oppression. Observed independently from the political context, penetration of the Real is obvious. Furthermore, the image of mediated death on YouTube provides room for

subtle biopolitical action that offers enough space for later implementation of meaning in the media. In this, YouTube works as just another communication channel that can be used to spread specific political propaganda, with the promise of independent information.

Another aspect is the ability of YouTube to make local conflicts visible, even those of the most totalitarian regimes, through personal story and amateur setting. The global audience has the opportunity to negotiate the status of the Other.

In the same way, the viewers of the Neda video become disembodied spectators, members of the "virtual crowd." That is the point at which "the accident museum" occurs.

REFERENCES

Abadi, C. (2010, June 14). Neda lives. *Foreign Policy*. Retrieved from http://www.foreign-policy. com/articles/2010/06/14/neda_lives

Alexander, B. (2011). *The new digital storytelling: Creating narratives with new media.* Santa Barbara: Praeger.

Barthes, R. (1991). Right in the eyes. In R. Barthes (R. Howard Trans.) *The responsibilty of forms: Critical essays on music, art, and re-presentation.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Barthes, R. (1977). The photographic message. In R. Barthes (S. Heath Trans.), *Image, music, text,* p. 15-31. New York: Hill and Wang.

Blossom, J. (2009). *Content nation: Surviving and thriving as social media changes our work, our lives, and our future.* Indianopolis: Wiley Publishing, Inc.

Bolter, J. D., & Grussin, R. (2000). *Remediation: Understanding new media.* Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

Castells, M. (2004). Space of flows, space of places: Materials for a theory of urbanism in the information age. In S. Graham (Ed.) *The cybercities reader.* London and New York: Routledge.

Cohen, R. (2009, June 29). Neda, Obama and the power of pictures. *The New York Times Magazine*: *The Ethicist.* Retrieved from http://ethicist.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/06/29/the-power-of-pictures/

Derrida, J. (1995). *The gift of death.* Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press. *Washington Times.* (2009, June). Editorial: Iran's Twitter revolution. Retrieved from http:// www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/jun/16/irans-twitter-revolution/

Fiske, J. (1998). Videotech, In N. Mirzoeff (Ed.) *The visual culture reader,* pp. 383-392. London and New York: Routledge.

Littau, K. (2003). Eye-hunger: Physical pleasure and non-narrative cinema, In J. Arthurs & I. Grant (Eds.), *Crash cultures: Modernity, mediation and the material*, p. 35-82. Bristol: Intellect Books.

Harvey-Lintz, T., & Tidwell, R. (1997). Effects of the 1992 Los Angeles civil unrest: Post-traumatic stress disorder symptomology among law enforcement officers. *The Social Sci-*

ence Journal, 34(2), 171-183.

Manovich, L. (2001). *The language of new media*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Riordan, K. (2009, June 24). Not that "Neda": How the wrong photo became an icon. Open Salon. [Online]. Retrieved from http://open.saloncom/blog/kathy_riordan/2009/06/23 /not _that_neda_how_ the_wrong_photo_became_an_icon

Scholder, A., & Crandall, J. (Eds.) (2001). *Interaction: Artistic practice in the network.* New York: D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers, Inc.

Virilio, P. (2000). *A landscape of events.* (J. Rose, Trans.). Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.

Žižek, S. (2008). *Violence: Six sideways reflections.* New York: Picador.

NOTES

[1]According to Barthes, *studium* represents the symbolic meaning of the particular photography; *punctum* refers to the more personal aspect, the one that "pierces the viewer." These concepts are explained in his book *Camera Lucida*.

[2]If this argument sounds unconvincing, let us remember the horrifying clips of the victims in Gaza just a few months before: the picture of a father who carries the remains of his son in a cardboard box, dead bodies with their arms and legs ripped off, lying in blood on a street. None of these individual people gained the same publicity, they are just referred to under the same group label: *victims*.