

essays



seeing things

Image and Affect

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‘[S]eeing things’—a phrase that hovers disturbingly between two senses. It indicates on the one hand that the reality of things is comprehended above all by the eye, by an act of visual perception. At the same time, if we are said to be ‘seeing things’ it means that we are suffering from hallucination, that form of fantasm that is taken to be reality.

Peter Schwenger, *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects*¹

Th[e] dead are supremely uninterested in the living: in those who took their lives; in witnesses – and in us ... What would they have to say to us? ‘We’—this ‘we’ is everyone who has never experienced anything like what they went through ... Can’t understand, can’t imagine. That’s what every soldier, and every journalist and aid worker and independent observer who has put in time under fire, and had the luck to elude the death that struck down others nearby, stubbornly feels. And they are right.

Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*²

In the age of digital media how might we speak about images of torture, and how might we might think about regarding the pain of others, to cite the title of Susan Sontag’s book?³ Through reference to a short six-minute film on torture, *A Silence Full of Things*⁴ by Chilean film-maker Alejandra Canales (resident in Australia), and the Abu Ghraib photographs, this essay addresses the coextensive function of imaging and viewing, and the need to rethink the relationship between media and the human body especially in relation to the concept of virtuality. It works with the thesis that we don’t see the world in the image, but that the image sees the world in us—in other words, images are not solely the visible features of objects that fall before our eyes, but are inflections of the outside world incorporated and transformed

by the body of the viewing subject. To see, in this sense, involves an act of composition, a process of corporeal *imagination*, that complicates the idea that we merely subtract information from the outside world. I propose thinking with the image in its correlation with the body, its specificity and its capacity for community through the production of virtual experience. I argue for the thesis that virtual experience is a capacity of the human body rather than a trait of media (although they act to extend this capacity), and that image making like all genres of communication is a practice in virtual community.

In different ways, the images of torture I deal with pose the very problem of representation and question its capacity to reproduce the singularity of experience, that torture happened to those bodies and not to most of us that look at the images. The events that lie behind these images, so to speak, are problematically figured in the bodies they represent. Both the actor performing in the film and the subject whose account of torture the film represents, Miriam, from Canales' film, says at one point, 'Who can possibly imagine this horror?'⁵ Miriam's question permeates both the ethos of visual representation and the provocation of *identification as communication*—her question is interrogative, posing the possibility or otherwise of a relationship between what has happened to her and what can be represented or mediated. To respond to her question involves self-reference, an induction that loops back into world of the image, regardless of how one answers. However, the ethos of representation, particularly in relation to the photographic image is one of loss and melancholia. Peter Schwenger writes that the 'very dynamic of representation involves loss, an absent object preceding its replication in the medium'.⁶ As Roland Barthes argues in *Camera Lucida*, this loss is driven by the insistence of the absent object. He writes that 'Photography's *noeme* will therefore be: "That has been", or again: the intractable'.⁷ Sontag, too, notes the liminal function of the photograph referring to it as 'as pseudo-presence and a token of absence'.⁸ Recalling the everyday uses of the photograph, the image of a beloved in one's wallet, the teenager's wall poster, the political campaign badge, photographs of one's children clipped to a car visor, or on one's desk at work, all of these according to Sontag express something 'both sentimental and implicitly magical: they are attempts to contact or lay claim to another reality'.⁹

The problem of representation is intensified in the digital age where relationships are increasingly mediated and images no longer have a stable referent. Characterising as orthodox what we might call a 'realist' tradition of photography, Mark Hansen writes that what is at stake in debates around contemporary modes of representation is more than just the contamination of realism by the fictions of discourse, or the creation of suspicion generated by Photoshop's ability to manipulate images. For Hansen, in question is 'the very possibility for accurate recording per se, the capacity of technical inscription to capture ... the singularity of experience'.¹⁰ This problematic is echoed in both *A Silence Full of Things*, and in the epigraph cited above from Sontag's book: How can we imagine? But the reality is that we do.

The epigraph comprises the closing lines of Sontag's book, a book that in its entirety is devoted to the impossible. It functions as an incitement to remember or imagine the unimaginable. Like Sontag, I can't presume to speak on behalf of those who have been killed or tortured, but as a viewer of these kinds of images, 'one should', as Sontag writes, 'feel obliged to think about what it means to look at them, about the capacity to actually assimilate what they show'.¹¹ What follows is an attempt to address Sontag's injunction, to address what it means to look and how we might assimilate what these images show. So how do we see, and how do we know what we see?

Canales' film speaks of torture, which today is constitutively a silent and invisible crime with little official history, but she refuses to display the tortured body in a conventional scene of witnessing, as forensically 'exposed' for consumption. Instead, Canales relies on a terse and fragmented verbal narration and a set of crafted visual figures to invoke the atrocity. The film opens to blackness, then the camera slowly tracks across a piece of intricate and luminous lace fabric in close-up. The mobile eye of the camera picks up a loose thread and traces it as it becomes a 'live' wire that transforms into the title of the film. The film is a study of 'things', a traversal that traces, tracks and looms over a series of objects: lace fabric; a woman dressed in white lace; a door bolt; an open window; a suitcase filled with water; a body overrun with toy soldiers; polaroid photographs of bound hands; a woman, Miriam, mopping a floor washed with blood; a dripping lock of hair; Miriam using make-up in front of an actor's mirror; an angled view of naked feet walking a floor; a low angled shot of urine running down legs. These images are accompanied by a voice-over that narrates a short biography beginning with an account of soldiers' footsteps foreshadowing the arrest of the subject in her home. The narration comprises a series of statements that are judgements and recollections about sensation ('it was completely foreign' 'I don't have any recollection of time between punches' 'you don't know when it will end'). When the film does use elaborated verbal description of an act of torture it does so with an example that describes the violent and visceral supplanting of speech by involuntary corporeal rhythms. Miriam describes 'the submarine':

They submerge you in water, but before that they hit you in the stomach so that when you are under the water, when you gasp, you choke, because air doesn't enter, water does slowly.

As Miriam says this, the viewer is presented with the close-up image of a dripping lock of hair, an overtly aesthetic image that works in contradiction to what the narration describes. The film represents torture through a process that composes it rather than exposes it.

In her seminal work on torture, *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry notes the capacity of pain to be referred to objects other than the suffering body. She writes:

To have pain is to have *certainty*; to hear about pain is to have *doubt* ... It is also possible, however, for the felt-attributes of pain to be lifted into the visible world but now attached to a *referent other than the human body*. That is, the felt characteristics of pain—one of which is its compelling vibrancy or its incontestable reality or simply its ‘certainty’—can be appropriated away from the body and presented as the attributes of something else (something which by itself lacks those attributes, something which does not in itself appear vibrant, real, or certain).¹²

A Silence Full of Things enacts this process of transferred reference or ‘analogical substantiation’ as Scarry terms it.¹³ The film refuses the equivalence of experience between tortured subject and the viewer, at the very least at the level of a certain kind of empiricism. One is not invited to see the naked truth, or truth as nakedness as Jacques Derrida might say.¹⁴ Instead the viewer is asked to assemble a gestalt and, as Anna Gibbs points out with reference to Henri Bergson, gestalts ‘are mixes of memory, emotion and anticipation’.¹⁵ Unlike the Abu Ghraib images, which circulate under the sign of transparency, Canales’ film has an ostensible ‘auratic’ or fetishistic quality, to use Laura Marks’ terms from her book *The Skin of the Film*. For Marks, meaning ‘inheres in the communication between self, objects and others’, and she describes objects that are communicated or ‘travel’ from one context to another as having an ‘aura’.¹⁶ Like the fetish, the aura signals investment. She writes that ‘the auratic character of things is their ability not simply to awaken memories in an individual, but to contain a social history in fragmentary form ... histories too volatile and disruptive to be related as simple stories’.¹⁷

Exposure, though, is the dominant rhetoric associated with the Abu Ghraib photographs. Looking at these images involves a different logic of consumption, but one equally dependent on a virtually constructed and incipient reality. Partaking of the historical documentary function of the photograph, the nakedness of prisoners’ bodies in these images personifies the trope of revelation. However, it is not quite so simple. Visibility is loaded, epistemologically: by the structure of exposure (in Derrida’s terms ‘truth as unveiling’), and affectively by the sight of humiliation and abuse. The photographs denigrate the bodies they show through a twisted logic of seeing, but one that nonetheless requires the corporeal mediation, and induction, of the viewing subject. Looking at them provokes a range of responses conditioned by those larger genres of the representation of the body, the pornographic obscenity and the forensic examination. So the Abu Ghraib images not only solicit distress or anger or shame at the treatment of bodies. They can be found in online gore galleries and distributed through peer-to-peer file sharing systems such as *eMule*, which suggests that these images are put to use in other affective assemblages that operate through rather more salacious interests—in fact, the photographs originally circulated between American soldiers and their families

as 'postcards' of a debauched cultural tourism. By displaying what *ought not have happened*, the photographs make visible what could be called an obscenity which, by its very nature, is an event that *ought not be seen*. This contortion of seeing with censure is one of the problematic elements of the way in which the photographs circulate in the public domain. To look at these images is to be contaminated by them, by the intolerable scenes to which the viewer bears witness, and by the manner in which the images frame the viewer as perpetrator. One mode of response to this profound disturbance produced in the viewer is to refer toxicity back to the object, to the dead or tortured body. Here, responsibility for the image is thrown back at the reality it represents. In her piece for the *New York Times*, Sontag writes that in seeking to limit a public relations disaster, the Bush administration's initial response to the images was 'to say that that the president was shocked and disgusted by the photographs—as if the fault or horror lay in the images, not in what they depict'.¹⁸ Paradoxically, then, it is the very toxicity of the photographs which render them amenable to varieties of transparency. What I want to argue is that these perceptions and judgements can coexist because they are expressions of the virtual nature of seeing, where meaning is not found preformed in the image, but rather is produced relationally. The relational production of meaning is common to both Canales' film and the Abu Ghraib images. What differs is the logic or formal coding through which meaning is accessed.

As snapshots of the real, the photographs function according to what the cognitive scientist Francisco Varela calls 'the visual extraction of features', where perception is defined as 'the truthful reconstruction of a portion of the visible world through a registering of existing environmental information'.¹⁹ What we in the West conventionally think of as empiricism is founded on the self-evidence of the object. Someone holds up some thing or points to it and says 'this is ... a body or a prison or an act of torture or a book or a concept'. Michel Foucault argues that this kind of empiricism is based on the relationship between seeing and saying, between the visible and the sayable, between words and things.²⁰ In his work on Foucault, Gilles Deleuze proposes that Foucault's main philosophical achievement was in analysing the conversion of visibilities in to the domain of discourse, and in proposing that forms of knowledge have been constituted on the historical variation of this relation.²¹ Deleuze goes on to say that the interlacing of these two disjunctive forms, the visible and the sayable, produces a kind of reversibility so that what is said is seen and vice versa.²² Donald Rumsfeld put this logic to good use when he refused to use the 'torture' word in relation to the Abu Ghraib images. He used the term 'abuse' instead. Sontag quotes Rumsfeld at a press conference: 'My impression is that what has been charged thus far is abuse, which I believe technically is different from torture ... And therefore I'm not going to address the "torture" word'. Sontag notes that, according to this discourse, the prisoners 'had possibly been the objects of "abuse", and eventually of "humiliation"—that was the most that was admitted'.²³

It seems to me that Canales' film works against this kind of knowing, against the transparent reversibility between words and things. Instead, the film itself enacts a disjunction between seeing and saying. The narration is spoken in Spanish and translated into English subtitles, but what is said does not coincide with the images or with the original event: the absent event is at least partly composed on the basis of a silence full of things—a silence that can speak only through the compositional act of perception. As viewers what we are given is a set of things which have a potential relation to what is said in the narration, but that potentiality must be filled in by the viewer in order for the film to make sense. The gaps between seeing and saying solicit an ethos of composition rather than exposition. There is more to seeing than what seems to immediately reveal itself before our eyes or what can be said of it. Canales provokes the operation of empathy at the level of sensate perception. The film visually mimes the sensory disorientation that often accompanies torture according to accounts given of it (Miriam's own narration is a good example). As the film opens we're not sure what we're seeing. The close up of the lace fabric, the movement of the camera refuses a spatial or objective clarity. Reality is either too close for comfort or too far away to grasp. It exists neither in the object of the image or in the viewer's field of vision but perhaps somewhere in between, in an act of correlation between the body and image. Laura Marks writes of 'the tactile and contagious quality of cinema as something we viewers brush up against like another body'.²⁴ Canales' film draws on, and actively plays on, the compositional aspects of the perceiving and sensate body, the manner in which it is 'structurally coupled' with its environment. For Varela and his co-writer, the biologist Humberto Maturana, the human body is both auto-poietic (self-producing) and structurally coupled with its environment. The environment triggers structural changes in the body but does not 'specify or direct them' as it is the internal structure of the organism 'that determines its interaction in the environment and in the world it lives in'.²⁵ As I've argued elsewhere, for Maturana and Varela ontogeny takes place in an environment where recurrent interactions act to transform the internal relations of systems. Hence, all knowing involves a kind of doing, as it is through *doing* that the structure of the organism is activated and expressed.²⁶ In relation to the structural coupling of embodied vision with the environment, Brian Massumi notes with respect to the notorious Held and Hein experiment with kittens, that vision doesn't develop properly if the body is immobilised. 'Determinate vision', he writes, 'emerges from movement'.²⁷

In one of his case studies, the neurologist Oliver Sacks describes how the emergence of cognitive structures, seeing and recognising objects, is determined by the patterning of sensory motor activity developed in connection with environment.²⁸ One of his blind patients, Virgil, had his sight restored through an operation in middle age. However, the outcome of this seemingly miraculous restoration was that he couldn't see or rather comprehend an object unless he held it in his hands at the same time as he looked at it. Writing of a visit to Virgil's

home, Sacks recounts what Virgil must do in order to see things. As Sacks arrived at Virgil's home, the cat and dog bounded into the room in greeting. However, Virgil was unable to tell the difference between his pets although one was black and the other white. He kept confusing them until he could touch them, and Sacks observes him feeling and looking at the cat with extraordinary intentness, correlating the cat as he puts it. Unlike Virgil, as Sacks argues, we achieve 'perceptual constancy—the correlation of all the different appearances, the transforms of objects—very early, in the first months of life'. He adds that the complexity of this task is scarcely realised because it is achieved so smoothly.²⁹

Sacks, Massumi, Maturana and Varela all stress the importance of sensory perception and historical patterning (corporeal memory, if you like) to knowing something. *A Silence Full of Things* works with this multi-sensory experiential and virtual component to knowing. As Marks argues with respect to the material mediation of meaning, meaning 'resides in objects, as habit stores memory in the body'.³⁰ Canales' film works with images that are crafted to be both enjoyable and distressing by appealing to the senses in a certain way. It mediates the experience to which it refers. It acts as a kind of touchstone rather than a window to torture. The white lace dress, the lock of dripping hair, invoke the haptic nature of looking—by looking at something you know what it feels like. Sense perception is cross-modal. As both Marks and Massumi posit, we can see texture.³¹ Some of the images in Canales' film invite the pleasurable touch of vision. Others invoke more negative affect. Urine running down Miriam's legs, the floor washed and mopped in blood invoke the rhythms of the distressed body and its work, more specifically a gendered body. I imagine that most young women will have experienced the shameful task of having to clean up a distressingly visible bloody mess, the more you try and clean up the worse you make it; however hard you try, you can't get away from it. Cleaning up after a bloody menstrual accident can't be equated with the act of torture, but Canales' choice of image here, that of mopping up blood, provokes something of the domestic and the feminine. Scarry refers to the manner in which torture mobilises and destroys 'civilisation' through the trope of domesticity. She writes of the torture 'room' (which mimes a deconstructive relation to the tropes and etymology of 'host', 'hospitality', 'hospital', and a movement towards 'hostility' and 'hostage') as part of a systematic protocol based on the realisation that that 'the unmaking of civilisation inevitably requires a return to and mutilation of the domestic, the ground of all making'.³²

Seeing, then, always involves something else. As Sacks writes, we 'are not given the world: we make our world through incessant experience, categorisation, memory, recollection'.³³ For Massumi, vision is always contaminated by what he calls 'multisense pastness'. It is 'constitutionally double ... *overseen*'.³⁴ For example, Sacks's patient, Virgil, needs to touch his pets before he can identify them visually. He needs the memory of tactility in order to see. Virgil lacks the haptic vision, that correspondence between sight and touch, that most of us

develop over time. In this sense, as Massumi writes, objects are ‘experienced oversights or excess seeings’. Perception is only partly the object out there. It could be said to have the structure of hallucination. For Massumi, hallucination is not the excess of visual perception but its very condition:

hallucination is as real as any thing. More radically, hallucination—the spontaneously creative addition of objects of perception that are not found ‘preformed’ out there—is generative of reality (more reality).³⁵

What Massumi refers to here is the virtual nature of seeing. The human body ‘does not coincide with its present. It coincides with its *potential*’, and he defines potential as the ‘future-past contemporary with every body’s change’.³⁶ Seeing, then, involves a process of future or past directed overseeing that adds to the image as it subtracts from it. Sontag implicitly recognises this quality of vision when she writes that images ‘lay down routes of reference, and serve as totems of causes: sentiment is more likely to crystallize around a photograph than around a verbal slogan’.³⁷ Arguably, then, what is often regarded as the cultural history of the photograph, its popular emergence as a sentimental artefact, cannot be separated from the manner in which images work on us. Photographs provoke the culturally and neurologically conditioned response of memory in either a past or future directed sense: they are either recollections or hallucinations of a relationship with things that have passed.

Like the photographic still, the moving image elicits a response that reproduces the cultural *within* corporeal modes of perception. Writing of software design programs that animate (manipulate) visible structures onscreen, Massumi makes the point that onscreen manipulation of objects mimics movement, the navigation of perceiving bodies around objects—we only know the visible form or dimensions of something by moving around it or, by extension, moving it around. Massumi asks:

Doesn’t topological design method digitally repeat what our bodies do noncomputationally as we make our way to and from our workstations? Then, when we watch the program run, aren’t we doing it again, slumped before the screen? Are we not immobily repeating our body’s ability to extract form from movement?³⁸

Images, then can be seen in terms of what Massumi calls ‘*technologies of emergent experience*’ that draw on the body’s physiology and proprioceptive habits where positioned looking is potential touching or a spatial–temporal relation.³⁹ On the one hand, the photograph is a technology of lapsed temporality, of memory. It lays claim to another time extracted from the subjectively temporalised architecture of the still objects it represents. Even when we do not recognise the photograph we hallucinate a memory for it by interpreting it, we invent a movement or time between the objects it represents, even if only at the level of the expression

of causes or effects through description. In fact, the way that we look at photographs is surprisingly similar to the manner in which we see physical objects in space where detail, as Alva Noë points out, comprises a kind of ‘virtual awareness’ of the object.⁴⁰ He uses the example of looking at a spherical object where, as we look, we can only see its facing side, yet we have no trouble perceiving the object as three dimensional. This experience is virtually present to us. Noë writes:

Our perceptual sense of ... wholeness—of its volume and backside, and so forth—consists in our implicit understanding (our expectation) that movements of our body to the left or right, say, will bring further bits ... into view. Our relation to the unseen bits ... is mediated by patterns of sensorimotor contingency.⁴¹

For photographs, as with Noë’s object ‘the detail is present not as represented, but as accessible’.⁴² The experience of content, then, is potential rather than preconstituted. Photographs are visual technologies that use immobility, or ‘facedness’, to potentialise experience (produced in the form of Barthes’ ‘that has been’). On the other hand, reflected in its early history of capturing the moving image, film intuitively experiences by composing form on the basis of visual movement. Film mimics the self-movement through which one tests and learns the sensorimotor patterns that compose the world of objects. As Massumi writes, ‘[t]he space of experience is really, literally, physically a topological hyperspace of transformation’.⁴³

Canales’ film both provokes and attenuates this virtual, experiential level to knowing. Towards the end of the film, referring to the infamous Abu Ghraib photograph of the hooded prisoner, Miriam says to us: ‘people who don’t know about torture can look at the Iraqi man with the hood on his head and his arms outstretched and be completely insensitive to that image—because people don’t know the noises, the smells of that image’. Here, the film refuses to produce the equivalence of experience (that belongs to the community of those who have been tortured), but through its imagery, sound and language, empathy is produced at the level of a sensation or sensory echo. We can’t imagine the horror, but we do. Communication is always a form of contamination, of contagion that draws on our past and our future. I’ve never been tortured like that. But I do know what it’s like to draw breath underwater, to be scared, to feel pain that you want to run away from but can’t. I know what it’s like to love the touch of a particular fabric, and to gather up the damp locks of someone you love. These experiences, the manner that the film remediates them (to use a term from Bolter and Grusin⁴⁴) are the foundation for my virtual experience, and my composition, of torture. As Miriam states as she mops up (or paints) the bloody floor: ‘It passes yet it remains. The memory of the senses is always there’. Images mediate the human body as represented object but also as viewing subject. ‘Vision’, as Anna Gibbs writes, ‘is not only a biophysical phenomenon: it is also a social process, a way of relating to what is seen. Rarely operating

in isolation from the other senses in practice, its dependence on them forces recognition of the cross modal operation of the senses, in which affect arguably functions as a switchboard'.⁴⁵

The digital age is characterised by a desire to capture an intimacy with things or affects whether it be to prove the veracity of an event or act, to know that something has occurred, or otherwise, to reclaim the intimacy of a relation that has passed or is to come (as in the function of email, the long-distance telephone call, or more recently the mobile phone and web cam). We are by nature social beings. Margaret Morse writes of the emergence of electronic and digital cultures in terms of Raymond Williams's observation about television. For Williams, she argues, television responded to the need for 'a mechanism of cultural integration created by the development of an industrial economy that uprooted much of the population, divided work from home, and isolated one person from another in privatised forms of living'. She goes on to say that '[h]ighways may link home to work and commerce, but they do not overcome the isolation of ... "mobile privatisation"'. According to Morse, the appeal of media is rooted in 'the need for human contact and the maintenance of identity and for a sense of belonging to a shared community'.⁴⁶ The ethos of representation, of its access to, or reproduction of singular experience, haunts acts of mediation and communication which continue to be centred on relations of proximity. What is the relationship between the proximate and the approximate in the digital age? Perhaps this question is a way of recognising that the actual and the virtual contaminate each other, and that communication is born from this very mixing.

With the 'near' and the 'nearly real' epistemology seems to be produced as a kind of microscopy or telescoping. Recently I bought my first digital camera, to take pictures of my children, the older two would shortly be leaving home, and my youngest—ask any parent, two, three or four is such a special ephemeral age, blink and you miss it. I wanted to take pictures that I could look at, so that I could have something of them, and digital technology is sold on the ethos of better resolution, the more pixels the clearer and closer the picture. Thinking about this, I remember Roland Barthes's meditation on the image of his dead mother in *Camera Lucida*. He writes of losing himself in the depths of the photograph, outlining the 'face loved by thought', making it into 'the unique field of an intense observation', and he confesses to confiding the task of enlarging the photograph to a laboratory, 'each shot engendering smaller details'. He knows however that this is fantasy, an optical illusion: 'Alas', he exclaims of the photograph, 'however hard I look I see nothing: If I enlarge I see nothing but the grain of the paper' (these days we don't even see the grain of the paper).⁴⁷ Barthes, here, describes the melancholic relation to the lost object but this way of looking at the photograph, as a piece of forensic evidence, doesn't account for the way that images work on us, in the hallucinatory sense that Massumi describes when he writes that 'vision gives back more to reality than it is given'.⁴⁸

Camera Lucida is not a meditation on the image, Barthes's meditation is the image. Henri Bergson writes of images in terms of this very aggregation. He writes that by image he means 'a certain existence which is more than that which the idealist calls a *representation*, but less than that which a realist calls a *thing*—an existence placed halfway between the "thing" and the "representation"'.⁴⁹ As I look at the photographs I take of my children, I realise that I'm not looking out into the world at them. I look because by looking I regain the sensation of corporeal and temporal proximity. The image sees the world in us. When I look at my daughter's face, I hear her voice, I see the sweep of her body, the swing of her hair, and those hands, so like my grandmother's, moving in time to her speech. When I look at my oldest son, I can smell him, the chemical factory of nervous flesh, worried if he's too thin or whether he looks 'right' before he goes out, the surprising thickness of his hair as I ruffle it. My youngest I just want to eat! I want to gather up his plump, wriggling, succulent, protesting flesh and make it part of me again.

Massumi writes that '[v]ision, as a phenomenal field fulfilling the conditions for empirical or object based perception, actually begins less with a fusion of preexisting elements than with a pre-fusion or perfusion of the senses'. Hence, the field of vision is never 'a blank slate' but involves always 'the almost-something of prior levels of synesthetic experience'.⁵⁰ The image provokes the sensory world in us. Photographs are technologies of memory, and are by nature sentimental, that's their ineffable quality. Even those of Abu Ghraib. When I look at them I have the same response as Sontag's to a similar image depicting a wounded Taliban soldier pleading for his life: Whose son? Whose father? Whose brother?⁵¹ This response to these images is not everybody's response; it is a *personal* one, yet arguably it is conditioned by the technology of photography itself. As I was researching this paper, I was struck by how much critical writing on photography takes the form of the subjective meditation, for example, the seminal works of Barthes and Sontag—this paper, too, partakes of this genre. As a genre of thinking and writing, the meditation is a hybrid form. It comprises self-reflexive analysis as well as anecdote and imagination, but it has its history in philosophy and in the analytic documentation of the world we live in—the works of Rene Descartes and Maurice Merleau-Ponty are exemplary in this respect.⁵² I propose that this manner of writing about photographs is partly operated by the manner in which images work on us, through their appeal to our habits and memories which comprise the way that we see and compose things.

Part of the horror of torture, and the way it works, is given through the image and reality of the tortured body's disconnectivity. This operation is twofold: first, through a response to the image of torture, the desire of the viewer to turn away from it; second, when the tortured body is reduced to feeling and knowing only itself, and reciprocity is foreclosed. Arguably, this is what the human being finds most intolerable and is reflected in methods of torture applied in places like Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay. These practices rely on corporeal

pain but also on sensory deprivation. In torture the body is taught its singularity without community. If we take the medium of the book as providing a similar kind of virtual experience as an image, J. M. Coetzee in his novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* provides a description of what it might be like to be tortured in this manner.⁵³ In the following passage a provincial magistrate once loyal to the empire becomes its victim:

In my suffering there is nothing ennobling. Little of what I call suffering is even pain. What I am made to undergo is subjection to the most rudimentary needs of my body: to drink, to relieve itself, to find the posture in which it is least sore ... my torturers were not interested in degrees of pain. They were interested only in demonstrating to me what it meant to live in a body, as a body, a body which can entertain notions of justice only so long as it is whole and well, which very soon forgets them when its head is gripped and a pipe is pushed down its gullet and pints of salt water are poured into it til it coughs and retches and flails and voids itself. They did not come to force the story out of me of what I had said to the barbarians or what the barbarians had said to me. So I had no chance to throw the high-sounding words I had ready in their faces. They came to my cell to show me the meaning of humanity, and in the space of an hour they showed me a great deal.⁵⁴

The hooded Iraqi prisoner in that infamous photograph is deprived of his extensive sensorium; he is hooded and cannot see, arms outstretched, he stands precariously on a small block. Wires operated by his torturers are his only connection to the outside world (apart, perhaps, from his muted sense of smell and sound). Those held at Guantanamo Bay are starved of company and light, that's all most of us know. Miriam says at one stage: 'one day I said to myself, just kill me, because I don't care anymore'. In her recollection she speaks only to herself. These are bodies deprived of the capacity to communicate, to express, to understand and to be understood. They are bodies reduced to the unit of one, to singularity, but as Massumi writes 'humans come in more than ones'.⁵⁵ How, then, can we understand or know these singular events, these tortured bodies? As Miriam asks, 'how can anyone possibly imagine?' But we do in the form of the images we compose with the objects that we come into contact with. It is a major achievement of Canales' film that it reconnects with the body of the viewer in a manner that calls into account the processes of identification, connection and both the singularity and community of experience.

I began this essay by positing a correlation between body and image and I have argued for a reconsideration of the manner in which images work on us, a reconsideration that takes into account both the embodied nature of perception and its virtual character. In the age of new media and virtual reality, the role that the human body plays in the process of communication tends to be neglected in favour of technological innovation, as if the body were not a technology in and of itself that inhabits the *inbetweenness* of things. By paying

attention to the body as media, to the manner in which it converts, modulates, and communicates experience, perhaps we will be less likely to exclude ourselves from engagement with who we are and what we are becoming.

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1. Peter Schwenger, *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 2006, p. 35.
2. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Penguin Books, London and New York, 2003, p. 113.
3. My thanks to Anna Gibbs and Jennifer Biddle for invaluable comments on an earlier draft of this paper. My thanks to Sneja Gunew for the opportunity to present an earlier version of this research to the 'Decolonizing Affect Symposium', Centre for Women's and Gender Studies, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, June 2006.
4. Alejandra Canales (dir.), *A Silence Full of Things*, Australian Film, Television and Radio School, North Ryde, NSW, Australia, 2005.
5. Canales, the director, has spoken of the film growing out of her friendship with Miriam—both women are Australian residents, the former from Chile, the latter from Uruguay—and of the manner in which their friendship affected how Canales shot the film. Panel conversation, Somatechnics Conference, Macquarie University, 19–21 April 2007.
6. Schwenger, p. 14.
7. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. R. Howard, Hill and Wang, New York, 1981, p. 77.
8. Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, Picador, New York, 1977, p. 16.
9. Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 16.
10. Mark B. N. Hansen, 'The Digital Typography of Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*', *Contemporary Literature*, XLV, 4, 2004, pp. 605–6.
11. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, p. 85.
12. Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: the Making and Unmaking of the World*, Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford, 1985, p. 13–14.
13. Scarry, p. 14.
14. See Jacques Derrida, 'Le facteur de la verite' in *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, pp. 411–96, 1987, and *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles*, trans. Barbara Harlow, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1979, for his discussions of the trope of truth as having the structure of unveiling and for the figure of the naked body as a figure of exposed truth devoid of fabrication.
15. Anna Gibbs, 'Horrified: Embodied Vision, Media Affect and the Images from Abu Ghraib' in Deborah Staines (ed.), *Interrogating the War on Terror: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle, UK, 2007, p. 141.
16. Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2000, pp. 119–20.
17. Marks, p. 120.
18. Susan Sontag, 'Regarding the Torture of Others', *New York Times*, 23 May 2004, pp. 1–4, <<http://www.nytimes.com>>.
19. Francisco Varela, *Ethical Know-How: Action, Wisdom, and Cognition*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, pp. 13–4, 1999.
20. 'Words and Things' (*Les Mots et les Choses*) was the original French title to Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things*, and better expresses the relationship between the visible and sayable that for Foucault constitutes 'knowledge'. He writes: 'To know must be to interpret: to find a way from the visible mark to that which is being said by it and which, without that mark, would lie like unspoken speech, dormant within things ... Divination is not a rival form of knowledge; it is part of the main body of knowledge itself.' *The*

- Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, trans. A. M. Sheridan, Tavistock Publications, London, 1970, p. 32. For an elaboration of this conception of knowledge in relation to the empiricism of the human body see my 'Physiology and Fabrication: The Art of Making Visible' in Elizabeth Klaver (ed.), *Images of the Corpse: From the Renaissance to Cyberspace*, University of Wisconsin Press, Wisconsin, 2004, pp. 16–38.
21. Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, trans. Sean Hand, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1988, p. 109.
 22. Deleuze, p. 112.
 23. Sontag, 'Regarding the Torture of Others', p. 1.
 24. Marks, p. xii.
 25. Humberto R. Maturana and Francisco J. Varela, *The Tree of Knowledge: The Biological Roots of Human Understanding*, trans. Robert Paolucci, Shambala, Boston and London, 1998.
 26. Maria Angel, 'Brainfood: Rationality, Aesthetics and Economies of Affect', *Textual Practice*, 19.2, 2005, pp. 323–48.
 27. Brian Masumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2002, p. 149.
 28. Oliver Sacks, *An Anthropologist on Mars*, Picador/Pan Macmillan, Sydney, Australia, 2000.
 29. Sacks, p. 121.
 30. Marks, p. 121.
 31. Marks, pp. 127–93, Massumi, p. 156.
 32. Scarry, p. 45.
 33. Sacks, p. 108.
 34. Massumi, p. 155.
 35. Massumi, p. 155.
 36. Massumi, p. 200.
 37. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, p. 76.
 38. Massumi, p. 183.
 39. Massumi, p. 192, p. 186.
 40. Alva Noë, *Action in Perception*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2004, p. 50.
 41. Noë, p. 63.
 42. Noë, p. 215.
 43. Massumi, p. 184.
 44. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin *Remediation*, MIT Press Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1999.
- Bolter and Grusin use the term 'remediation' to refer to a process where newer media rework or repurpose older forms with a view to rendering representation more real and less mediated (p. 61). For an account of how media remediate the human see Maria Angel and Anna Gibbs, *Media Affect and the Face: Biomediation and the Political Scene*, *Southern Review*, 38.2, pp. 24–39, 2006.
45. Anna Gibbs, 'After Affect: Sympathy, Synchrony and Mimetic Communication' in Greg Seigworth and Melissa Gregg (eds), *The Affect Reader*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, forthcoming.
 46. Margaret Morse, *Virtualities: Television, Media Art, and Cyberculture*, University of Indiana Press, Bloomington, 1998, p. 3.
 47. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, pp. 99–100.
 48. Massumi, p. 155.
 49. Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. by N. M. Paul and W. S. Palmer, Zone Books, New York, 1991, p. 9.
 50. Massumi, p. 156–7.
 51. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, p. 65.
 52. This paper owes an unpaid debt to these two writers. The acknowledgement of their influence on this work, and on the philosophical traditions at work within it, would easily comprise a paper in its own right. Of particular importance have been Descartes *Discourse on Method* (trans. F. E. Sutcliffe Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1968.) and his *Meditations* (F. E. Sutcliffe Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1968), and Merleau-Ponty's *The Phenomenology of Perception* (trans. Colin Smith, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1962).
 53. With respect to the concept of writing and books as a similar kind of virtual media to images, Marcel Proust was to write '[e]ach reader reads only what is inside himself. A book is only a sort of optical instrument which the writer offers to let the reader discover in himself what he would not have found without the aid of the book'. Cited in Marvin Minsky, *The Emotion Machine*, Simon and Shuster, New York, 2006, p. 7.
 54. J. M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Penguin, New York and London, 1982, p. 115.
 55. Massumi, p. 120.