

# Publicity and Indifference (Sarajevo on Television)

DRAFT

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NOT FOR CITATION

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The price of eternal vigilance is indifference.

- Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* 30

Here in Sarajevo, hundreds of TV crews parade before our very eyes; dozens of foreign journalists, reporters, and writers. Everything is known here, right down to minutest details, and yet, nothing ...

- Zlatko Dizdarevic, "What Kind of Peace Is This?," *New York Times Magazine*, 10 April 1994, 21

With these epigraphs I aim to abbreviate a frequently cited "lesson of Bosnia" -- that a country was destroyed and a genocide happened, in the heart of Europe, on television, and what is known as "the world" or "the West" simply looked on and did nothing. Bosnians, said one to the American journalist David Rieff, "felt as you would feel if you were mugged in full view of a policeman and he did nothing to rescue you" (*Slaughterhouse* 140). Or, as Rieff himself says with slightly more precision, "200,000 Bosnian Muslims died, in full view of the world's television cameras, and more than two million other people were forcibly displaced. A state formally recognized by the EC and the US and the UN ... was allowed to be destroyed. While it was being destroyed, UN military forces and officials looked on, offering 'humanitarian' assistance and protesting ... that there was no will in the international community to do anything more" (23).

There is a programmatic quality to these formulations, and it is that program which I want to investigate here: the complex which links what we so loosely call 'the media' and its images with action or inaction -- or more precisely to the expectation of action, and the relation of the humanitarian response to that expected action. You can find this program everywhere today, in military or political or historical discussions of so-called 'postmodern wars' or humanitarian crises, in legal or ethical commentaries on genocide and catastrophe, and in critical media-studies analyses of what has been called the "CNN effect" or the role-of-the-media in contemporary conflict. It seems as if we cannot talk about what happened in Bosnia or Somalia or Rwanda without talking about the media. Think of the feature films already available about the conflict in the former Yugoslavia: even skipping Marcel Ophuls' war reporter epic-doc *The Troubles We've Seen*, from the British *Welcome to Sarajevo* to the Spanish *Territorio Comanche* to the Serbian *Pretty Village, Pretty Flame*, the war apparently cannot be portrayed without putting a reporter and cameras at the center of the action, which is to say, the war cannot be presented and its story told without putting its immediate presentation and the tellers of its story, then and there, at the heart of the story itself. Or think, in a less fictional mold, of the extraordinary series of articles, still in progress in the *New York Review of Books*, in which Mark Danner has chronicled the high and low points of the battles over Bosnia -- he was there, of course, but his articles insistently begin in watching television:

To the hundreds of millions who first beheld them on their television screens that August day in 1992, the faces staring out from behind barbed wire seemed painfully familiar ...

begins his 4 December 1997 piece; or the opening sentences of the 20 November installment:

Scarcely two years ago, during the sweltering days of July 1995, any citizen of our civilized land could have pressed a button on a remote control and idly gazed, for an instant or an hour, into the jaws of a contemporary Hell. Taking shape upon the little screen, in that concurrent universe dubbed 'real time,' was a motley, seemingly endless caravan, bus after battered bus rolling to a stop and disgorging scores of exhausted, disheveled people. ... every last one a woman or a child. The men of Srebrenica has somehow disappeared. Videotaped images, though, persist: on the footage shot the day before, the men can be seen among the roiling mob, together with their women and children, pushing up against the fence of the United Nations compound, pleading for protection from the conquering Serbs.

Or finally, think of the President of the United States, whose extraordinary (in so many ways) Kigali confession last week of his and our inaction in the face of the Rwandan genocide put him squarely -- and immobile -- in front of the television:

Today the images of all that haunt us all: the dead choking the Kigara River, floating to Lake Victoria. [...] We did not act quickly enough after the killing began. [...] All over the world there were people like me, sitting in offices, day after day after day, who did not fully appreciate the depth and the speed with which you were being engulfed by this unimaginable terror.

What interests me here is less the precise formulations of and differences between these analyses than their ubiquity. The recurrence of the trope across so many different accounts and styles and methodological predispositions mirrors somehow the very phenomenon it describes: the omnipresence of the gesture is the very ubiquity of the camera, the image or specter of the camera which now seems to haunt our consciousness -- indeed, to form the most privileged figure of our ethical consciousness, our conscience, our responsibility itself.

This is, of course, the situation Michael Ignatieff described some years ago -- before Bosnia and Rwanda, when the crises were those of starvation and Cold War proxies -- in an essay on "the ethics of television," now available as the first chapter of The Warrior's Honor:

Whether it wishes or not, television has become the principal mediation between the suffering of strangers and the consciences of those in the world's few remaining zones of safety. ... It has become not merely the means through which we see each other, but the means by which we shoulder each other's fate. (33)

We could invert this slightly and say simply that humanitarianism as we know it today -- trans-border relief -- is unthinkable except in the age of more-or-less instant information. The founding of the International Committee of the Red Cross in 1864 is linked directly to the possibility of high-speed transmission by telegraph, and contemporary relief operations since Biafra and Ethiopia have been born and bathed in the light of the television camera and the speed of the satellite uplink -- and it sometimes seems to depend on a fairly limited set of presuppositions about the link between knowledge and action, public information or opinion and response. In some cases, like that of the international human rights NGO movement, as Alex de Waal has argued, the discussion turns on the concept of "mobilizing shame." In the humanitarian arena proper, its effective founder Bernard Kouchner put the coordination between media and intervention epigrammatically: "sans médias, pas d'action humanitaire importante, et celle-ci, en retour, nourrit les gazettes" (Le malheur des autres 210) -- he calls this "la loi du tapage," the law of noise. And among military thinkers, practitioners, and diplomats, the sense that television imagery or news dispatches "drive" decisions about intervention has by now gained a name of its own -- "the CNN effect" -- and is the topic of vigorous debates. [The literature is extensive -- in France there is Kouchner, Rony Brauman, and Luc Boltanski in particular, and here it stretches from Jonathan Benthall's

groundbreaking Disasters, Relief, and the Media to Johanna Neuman's Lights, Camera, War, Philip Seib's Headline Diplomacy, Larry Minear et al.'s The News Media, Civil War, Humanitarian Action, Warren Strobel's Late-Breaking Foreign Policy, James Gow's Bosnia by Television, Edward Girardet's edited collection Somalia, Rwanda, and Beyond, Rotberg and Weiss's From Massacres to Genocide, and important studies of the CNN effect by Nik Gowing and Steven Livingston, among others.]

Thanks to the role played by what is loosely called "public opinion" in the media age, which is to say, the displacement or the warping of state institutions and state power by emergent alternatives centers of power like the media and non-governmental organizations, thanks to that displacement the so-called "famine movement" also represents the emergence of a new sort of international actor, apparently unlimited by traditional notions of sovereignty, accountability, borders, interest, and the rest. I want to propose that we understand the "humanitarian action" which triumphed in Bosnia in a somewhat different way than either of the two options that seem to be available -- it is neither inaction, a passive acquiescence or a cover-up, a fig leaf that disguises the actual doing-of-nothing, nor is it necessarily a heroic new non-state politics of the sort anticipated by many of the founders of the movement. It is an action that -- precisely because it offers the possibility of a reference not to national interest or the defense of the state but to what it calls, alternatively, "human beings," "victims," "misfortune" or "suffering," and does so by way of public opinion and the image, which is to say by reference to the order of the ethical -- opens the resources of a political discourse which, for better and more often for worse, does not have to justify itself in political terms. It acts, with enormous effectivity, and its action threatens to totalize the field of all possible action, not simply to hide inaction or offer alibis for not doing other things but more radically to interrupt, to render impossible, to actively block or prevent those actions.

And this action has as its field or condition the image, sometimes precisely the image and sometimes more generally what we nickname "the media" or "real time." Recall that for Walter Benjamin, in the essay on "The Artwork in the Age of its Mechanical Reproducibility" at least, the invention of the motion picture introduced nothing less than a temporal explosion, "the dynamite of the tenth of a second," such that in what remained, the "far-flung ruins and debris" of our daily lives or our familiar terrain, would open up "an immense and unexpected field of action [Spielraum, champ d'action]." Film and today television do not only collapse and annihilate, as it is said so often, time and distance -- they also make unprecedented times and spaces available for action, real virtualities that are marked not only by the negativity of this, "dynamite" but also by the affirmation of possibilities of engagement, "action" or "play." Field of action, OK, but what kind of action? The answer is also Benjaminian, though this time in a different way. The privileged example at the close of the Artwork essay is war, what he calls the aesthetics of mechanized warfare, which he says is discerned more clearly or best "captured by camera and sound recording" and not the naked eye (242, 251). Today cameras don't simply represent conflicts but take part in them, shape not only "our" understanding of them but their very conduct. We need to attend to these sounds and images not just as accounts of war but as actions and weapons in that war, as operations in the public field which today constitutes an immense field of opportunity for doing battle, weapons in what we too easily call today's "image contests" or "publicity battles."

"There was a cameraman there" -- this is a fragment from a news report about a man shot by a sniper in Sarajevo:

Mr. Sabanovic got in the way at a particularly dangerous Sarajevo crossroads. That is why there was a cameraman there to film his near death. Because the spot is treacherous, the chances are good that a few hours of patience by a cameraman will be rewarded with compelling images of a life being extinguished or incapacitated. (Roger Cohen, "In Sarajevo, Victims of a 'Postmodern' War," New York Times, 21 May 1995)

What difference does it make that a cameraman is there, as he or she so often is? No matter where, it seems, a camera regularly happens to be there, when something happens to happen. So much so that it has become a cliché, a veritable commonplace, to say that today things don't happen unless a camera is there. Of course, it takes not just a camera, but an entire network of editing, transmitting, distributing, and viewing technologies -- and agents -- that extend out from the camera, to make what McLuhan so famously and confusingly called a "global village." But it begins with the camera and its operator, with the fact of their already having been there.

What the journalist here wants us to understand is the complex structure of that "there" -- was it a place where cameras waited patiently for things to happen (a particularly dangerous crossroads), or a place where other things happened because cameras waited patiently (compelling images of lives extinguished)? The camera is there because of the danger, but its silent witness transforms the event and its "there" -- that is what matters here. Thanks to the camera, what it means for the event to occur, its taking-place, undergoes a mutation. The crossroads so precisely targeted in the gunsight of the sniper is also the blurred intersection between what our impoverished theoretical vocabulary seems only to allow us to call event and representation, occurrence and image. This confusion cannot be written off as one more version of a timeless ontological conundrum (which comes first?), nor caricatured as a postmodern prejudice for the discursive over the real, nor simply eliminated with the declaration of the moral superiority of the things themselves. The confusion itself is all too real and -- especially in the case of events like those at this crossroads -- it constitutes something like an exemplary ethico-political difficulty and opportunity for us.

What is at stake, finally, in this confusion is a certain experience and definition of public space and time, of publicity and of -- I think -- a crisis in our sense of public information and exposure today. The corollary, of course, of the cameraman's being there is that, in some sense, we are too. The camera metaphorizes the becoming-public of the event, because we who watch and listen are also caught in the double intersection of the sniper's and the cameraman's viewfinders -- not as potential victims exactly, but in some other sense as targets of those vectors (borrowing the word in this sense McKenzie Wark in Virtual Geography). What do we do in watching and listening? When I say "we" I mean that hazy thing called the public, a rich concept sent to us by the Enlightenment and the French Revolution and today in need of extensive rethinking. If the public means us, us in our exposure to others, then today "we" cannot be something given in advance, not the sum total of all of us somewhere or sometime, not a community or a people, but rather something that comes after the image, a possibility of response to an open address -- the public, we could say in shorthand, is what is hailed or addressed by messages that might not reach their destination. We could even say -- thinking about the images at hand -- that what makes something public is precisely the possibility of being a target and of being missed.

So the television image constitutes a field of action -- not just a representation of actions elsewhere, but a field in or on which actions themselves occur -- a public field, we could say, but only if we're willing to part with some of the cherished predicates of that concept.

We can begin with this snapshot, or live feed. Somalia, December 1992. The first American soldiers of Operation Restore Hope land on an Indian Ocean beach at Mogadishu, met not by clan fighters or starving children but by hundreds of reporters, camerapeople, technicians ... whom, as it turns out, the American military had informed in advance of the time and place of the operation. Kouchner's claim that "without television, there is no humanitarian intervention," seems to come true in a multiple and almost perverse way here: not simply that images -- there, of starving children -- could shame governments into action, but that armies will undertake humanitarian rescue missions for the publicity value alone, and that publicity could also bring the mission to an end.

What happened there? We are not finished understanding the complex of clan politics and paramilitary violence, the liquidation of the post-colonial and post-Cold-War state, starvation and even famine, and the succession of interventions, humanitarian and armed ones, and then nation-building which followed them. But the images -- from the starving children to the gun-belted fighters, the brightly-lit landing and the camcorder pictures of a helicopter pilot held hostage and a dead soldier dragged in the street -- and the phrases -- Mad Max vehicles, warlords, the photo op invasion and the CNN effect, and the Mogadishu line -- have already decisively shaped the interpretation and practice of humanitarian interventions in the mere five years since that fateful night in the lights.

The lesson of those lights was already clear, the morning after the event, to the grand old man of American foreign policy, George Kennan, who awoke that morning in December 1992 to watch the soldiers landing in real time, surrounded by reporters and interviewed on the beach, and offered a harsh assessment of the damage. He told his diary, and then the opinion page of the New York Times, that he had finally seen enough: "If American policy from here on out, particularly policy involving the use of our armed forces abroad, is to be controlled by popular emotional impulses, and particularly ones provoked by the commercial television industry, then there is no place not only for myself, but for what have traditionally been regarded as the responsible deliberative organs of our government" ("Somalia, Through a Glass Darkly," 30 September 1993, A23)

Kennan -- the very architect of the Cold War, the author of the doctrine of "containment," Mr. X himself -- watches his era end on his television, not with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of Europe, nor with the great borderless coalition and its triumph in the Gulf War, but with the chaos on an African beach, disaster breaking out of 'new world order' with such energy and confusion that it threatens to tear apart the very institutions of government and publicity themselves. What is threatened in Mogadishu, not by the clans but by the cameras and their soldiers who are drawn to them, is nothing less than the basic structures of American democracy - responsibility and deliberation. The rational consideration of information, with a view to grounding what one does in what one knows, now seems overtaken and displaced by "emotion," and responses are now somehow "controlled" or, better, remote-controlled by television images. What disappears is the place of politics itself -- it's not only that there is, as he says, "no place" for him, but "no place" at all for a decision, for the organs that regulate the linkage between knowledge and action. Television -- that virtual place -- displaces the public place, substituting emotion for reason, immediacy for the delay proper to thought.

In somewhat more complex, but no more theoretical, terms, Paul Virilio has suggested that this phenomenon, the displacement of the traditional rational-critical experience of the public sphere by what is nicknamed "emotion," characterizes in general the contemporary function of televisual publicity:

The space of politics in ancient societies was the public space (square, forum, agora ...). Today, the public image has taken over public space. Television has become the forum for all emotions and all options. We vote while watching TV. [...] We are heading toward a cathodic democracy, but without rules. [...] There is no politics possible at the scale of the speed of light. Politics is the time of reflection. Today, we no longer have time to reflect; the things that we see have already taken place. And we must react immediately... Is a real-time democracy possible? An authoritarian politics, yes. But what is proper to democracy is the sharing of power. When there is no longer time to share, what do we share? Emotions" (L'écran du désert, 71-72).

This compelling immediacy of the media, the magnetic pull of the image and the microphone, has been nicknamed in the United States "the CNN effect," and its power has been testified to by the highest officials of our government and military. Images do make things happen, they certify, and sometimes too

quickly. We can and should dispute the contention that discussion or sharing disappear in the putative instantaneity of the live transmission -- as if it does not have its own temporality, its own internal structure, its delays and frames and decisions -- but there is no debating the claim that the image --- and especially the image of catastrophe -- has the power to circumvent or pressure political institutions, and not just in so-called democracies.

In Somalia events did seem dictated by this CNN effect, with the attendant displacement of deliberation by emotion and hence the short-circuiting of the public sphere, whether it was a matter of the starving children, the proud international forces, or the dead American soldier. But what then of Bosnia, where on the contrary, everything seemed to be visible as it happened, and yet -- it is said-- virtually nothing happened in response? As David Rieff wrote, "no slaughter was more scrupulously and ably covered "and "it [did] no good" -- "we failed" (Slaughterhouse 223, 222):

the hope of the Western press was that an informed citizenry back home would demand that their governments not allow the Bosnian Muslims to go on being massacred, raped, or forced from their homes. Instead, the sound bites and "visual bites" culled from the fighting bred casuistry and indifference far more regularly than [they] succeeded in mobilizing people to act or even to be indignant. (216).

If the lesson of Somalia was that cameras made things happen, and sometimes too quickly, Bosnia seems to tell the opposite story: a brutal combination of overexposure and indifference. Somalia was hyperactivity, Bosnia inactivity, just watching. This was the clichéd meaning for which "Sarajevo" became the metonymy. Let me cite just three examples, from war correspondents themselves, of the trajectory which travels from a certain expectation about the putative power of images to despair at their failure and even to anger, from Mogadishu to Sarajevo.

1. Giles Rabine, reporting live for France 2 from Sarajevo just after the fall of Srebrenica, comments simply that, after thirty-nine months of televised siege, "the Sarajevans have had enough of being interviewed, being filmed, being photographed; they've had enough of us watching them die, live, without trying to do anything to save them. And who's to say they're wrong?" [13 July 1995.]

2. Only nine months into the siege, in a dispatch that won her the first of many prizes for coverage of Sarajevo, CNN's Christiane Amanpour reported on a creeping despair with the televisual:

Take any day in the life of this city. The sights are so familiar, perhaps they have lost their impact. ... Around noon another mortar falls. More people are killed and injured. They are rushed to the hospital. The emergency ward is full. Surgeons labor to save lives. The operating theatre is awash in blood. Early on in the war the staff were patient with photographers, hoping perhaps their pictures would shock the world into doing something. The world has done nothing and the doctors have lost hope and patience. (CNN, 26 January 1993)

That was in January 1993, when she was just back from Somalia; in July of that year she again reported something similar:

Those of us who've stayed in Sarajevo -- which is the majority of the press corps -- have been welcomed throughout most of this year. People have looked at us as their conduit to the West, and perhaps have looked at us as being able to jog, perhaps, some conscience in the West. The attitude towards us has been changing -- certainly, in the last month. People have seen that really nothing has changed, that promises have been made and broken -- promises from the Western allies have been made and broken. And people look to us and sort of vent their frustrations on us. ... So the tide is turning somewhat, but that's a measure of people's despair, I suppose. (CNN, Larry King Live, 30 July 1993)

3. This is also the situation New York Times Sarajevo correspondent Roger Cohen encounters in the article I quoted earlier and which I'd like now to analyze in somewhat more detail. In May 1995, he reports from the besieged city, on the front page of the Sunday New York Times, about what he and the headline call a "postmodern war." Postmodern for many reasons, but mainly because it's a matter of images, of what the reporter finds to be a dangerously blurred boundary between event and representation, and of a certain paralysis, the apparent re- or dis-location of the field of knowledge and action to the screen of a monitor and the entry of those representations back into the field of the things and events they ought simply to represent. Here is his lead for an article headlined "In Sarajevo, Victims of a 'Postmodern' War":

Faruk Sabanovic, a pale and gentle-featured youth, is a thoroughly modern victim of war. He lies in the main hospital here with a video of the moment when he was shot and became a paraplegic. There he is, outside the central Holiday Inn, walking briskly across the street, his hair ruffled by the wind. The crack of a shot echoes in Sarajevo's valley. He falls. He lies on his side. He is curled in an almost fetal position. A United Nations soldier looks on, motionless.

A Sarajevan man arrives, screaming abuse at the soldier, who eventually moves his white United Nations armored personnel carrier. This slight movement is enough to cover the civilian as he rushes out to retrieve Mr. Sabanovic, whose lithe body has turned limp.

"It's strange when I watch the video, I feel like it's somebody else," said Mr. Sabanovic, who is 20. "But I remember it so well. After I was hit, I felt my legs in my chest. Then I saw my feet. I tried to move them. But I could not. This United Nations soldier was looking at me. He did nothing. He just looked. For me, it was so long."

The scene is shocking, doubly so by virtue of the videotape. The civilian "victim" is not only crippled by a sniper, but is also in possession of the images of his attempted murder. The reporter can thus not only interview the person but watch TV with him. And the image is somehow not just of Faruk Sabanovic or of what happened to him on the street in Sarajevo; it is for Cohen an allegory, an image of something else, more confusing, an image of the confusion and loss of orientation -- in images -- which have affected our sense of reality itself. Watching this tape, with its inert star next to him, Cohen seems paralyzed by the sight of people watching: "Faruk lies ... with a video"; "a UN soldier looks on, motionless"; "this UN soldier was looking at me -- he did nothing -- he just looked."

Thanks to images like these, we are all like that UN soldier, just looking, or like the cameraman, waiting. That is their rich allegorical meaning, their hermeneutic supplement: they mean the inaction that they demand of their producer and their viewer.

The images capture more than the maiming of Mr. Sabanovic; they capture the increasingly surreal and sordid nature of the three-year-old Bosnian war. A civilian is shot on a city street; a television cameraman, waiting at a dangerous crossroads to see somebody killed or mutilated, films the shooting; a soldier sent by the United Nations as a "peacekeeper" to a city officially called a "safe area" watches, unsure what to do and paralyzed by fear. The elements of this troubling collage are also elements of what some military analysts are now calling "postmodern" or "future" war.

In the tape, in the hospital, Cohen sees an image from Sarajevo and in it the whole new troubling thing metonymized. As the space and time of what happens shifts onto the screen, even "there" in Sarajevo, all sort of boundaries are collapsing with it. He enumerates the transformation or the decay that coincides with the emergence of the videotape: states are replaced by militias or other informal groupings; armies and peoples become indistinguishable; central authorities disappear; and "live images of suffering, distributed worldwide, sap whatever will or ability there may be to prosecute a devastating military campaign." Looking is not acting, in Sarajevo or in New York, and the diffusion of images goes hand in

hand for Cohen with a more disturbing dispersion or evisceration of the conditions of action: lost today are centrality, authority, borders and clear distinctions, principles, and all the rest.

The triumph of images figures this for Cohen: images sap the will in war, he says, and yet paradoxically it is a war of images, fought with images.

Mr. Sabanovic got in the way at a particularly dangerous Sarajevo crossroads. That is why there was a cameraman there to film his near-death. Because the spot is treacherous, the chances are good that a few hours of patience by a cameraman will be rewarded with compelling images of a life being extinguished or incapacitated.

A "compelling image" is, of course, a weapon, and the cameramen sometimes seemed like the best gunners the Bosnian Government had, being deprived of almost all other military equipment. Certainly most of the journalists in Sarajevo understood this, and recognized that their work was not simply impartial ... didn't Somalia suggest, after all, that images could be compelling, that tele-guided public opinion could force action?

Cohen, in the late spring of 1995, has seen enough to withdraw that conclusion. There are no compelling images: "Thus, just as the world has long watched the crushing of Sarajevo -- so endless as to become increasingly unreal -- the people of Sarajevo may now watch from their hospital beds the moment they were crippled, so abruptly that comprehension is difficult."

The image sparks a crisis, not just in action but in comprehension, and the sentence that speaks of it also tells the story of a more profound disturbance. "People can watch the moment they were crippled, so abruptly that comprehension is difficult," he writes, but just what exactly happens so abruptly, the crippling or the watching? Surely Cohen means the suddenness of the rifle shot itself, caught on tape, but his dangling modifier betrays the ambiguity he is most alert to, the difficulty of discerning event and video repetition. In the face of this difficulty, Cohen proposes some reservations, or some objections, which although they are not formalized, and hesitant at best, do constitute something like a systematic critique of this 'postmodern' condition -- it troubles him and with him, "reality": Sarajevo becomes surreal, unreal, endless ... there is too much watching, too much mediation, even there in Sarajevo, so that even the subject of the image is himself alienated from it, split from himself. "I feel like it's somebody else," says Sabanovic, now sharing the position of the immobilized one who just watches. The sniper and what Cohen calls "the twisted video" together reduce everyone to a paraplegic -- inert, paralyzed by fear, just looking. And yet Cohen finds a moral for the story in the prone 20-year-old, "a strength and a conviction that rise far above the banal violence of his video with its succinct accounting of a directionless war in which civilians die live on camera." Without direction, pulling the very subject of the image apart from himself, the war of "live death" comes to mean for Cohen at once an excess of imagery and a failure of the promise of those images -- no action, no comprehension, only difficulty and a certain indetermination. Faruk Sabanovic, for his part, thanks the camera: the United Nations, he says, is "just here to ease consciences. ... And I know they brought me to the hospital in their ambulance only because the camera happened to be there. I have to say that I despise them."

So in the end the two viewers of the tape disagree about its effects while agreeing that it has one, and these opinions recapitulate what I think represents the crisis of a certain idea of publicity. The symmetrical opposition of the interpretations -- Mogadishu and Sarajevo -- confirms that what is in question is the theoretical status and the actual function of the public image. Sabanovic believes in the CNN effect: "they brought me to the hospital only because the camera happened to be there." Cohen fears that the camera and the watching cripples our responses, that "images sap the will." The strong version of his hypothesis has also been articulated by none other than Jean Baudrillard, who thus forms

an equally symmetrical pair with Virilio. Baudrillard suggests that “Bosnia exemplifies total weakness” ... “the West has to watch helplessly,” in a “military masquerade where the virtual soldier ... is paralyzed and immobilized” (*Libération* 17 July 95; trans. in *This Time We Knew* 87). And “the Bosnians .... end up finding the whole situation unreal, senseless, and beyond their understanding. It is hell, but a somewhat hyperreal hell, made even more so by their being harassed by the media and humanitarian agencies .... thus they live amid a type of spectral war” (*Libération* 7 January 1993; *This Time* 81)

Some American commentators have drawn radical conclusions from this proposition, and although it is in a certain sense highly disputable there is nevertheless something extremely important at stake here, which this radicalization can help clarify. In an recent collection of essays, called *This Time We Knew* and edited by Thomas Cushman and Stjepan Mestrovic, the editors attempt the measure the significance of what seems an obvious failure ... the last time around, we might have been able to say we didn't know what was happening, but throughout the second genocide in Europe in this half century, we have no such excuse. Because of television and the rest of the “daily barrage of information and images,” it is not possible for “even the most disinterested viewer to ignore the grim reality of genocide.” Their “Baudrillardian” hypothesis:

Lack of action proceeds ... from the fact that the mediated images of the world are mere representations that lend an air of unreality to the things they represent. ... Media watchers lose touch with reality, ... stand passively by or engage in self-serving forms of ineffective action, ... [their] voyeurism and individualism feed[ing] on televised images of evil.” (79)

And that means that the crisis is not merely one of inaction. In fact, what is lost in Bosnia is nothing less than the Enlightenment, and with it the discovery of the public sphere as the site where knowledge and action are articulated. They feel obliged to ask, then, “whether there is any relationship between the degree or extent of public information and practical or moral engagement by those who receive it” (7).

The important point is that there is a sharp discrepancy between what we know and what we do, and this discrepancy has been neglected in most previous analyses. Yet this gap between knowledge and action is full of meaning for apprehending history as well as the present. In addition, this contrast causes us to rethink the success of the so-called Enlightenment project: the passive Western observation of genocide and other war crimes in the former Yugoslavia amounts to a toleration of the worst form of barbarity and gives us pause to wonder whether, behind the rhetoric of European progress and community, there is not some strong strain of irrationality that, if laid bare, would call into question the degree of enlightenment the civilized West has managed to attain at the century's end. (8)

It is not clear just how far these two are willing to go in “calling into question” the Enlightenment axioms that the “gap between knowledge and action” in Bosnia provokes. The specter of “irrationality” -- always opposed to a normative reason -- and the progressivist hint in the word “attain” suggests that they remain committed to the project that has become questionable. But what happens if we seize on this insight -- that the Enlightenment and its public sphere are in question -- and try to move beyond the simple desire to recover it, to rescue it from its temporary loss. Suppose it were, precisely, the problem ... What failed in Bosnia? We often say that we failed, and we imply that we are just this well-known public of the “so-called Enlightenment project.” But the more we rely on and retreat to the sense that the public sphere collapsed, the more we shore up just the notion whose apparent solidity may be implicated in the disaster. What if the belief in this public was part of the failure, if the faith in the obviousness, the evidence or self-evidence of the pictures and the automatic chain of reasoning they inspire, was not what failed but the very failure itself? What is at stake is the program which expects that, as David Rieff puts, “one more picture, or one more story, or one more correspondent's taped stand-up in front of a shelled, smoldering building would bring people around, would force them to stop shrugging their shoulders, or

like the United Nations, blaming the victims" -- one more picture would force something to happen -- what if just that expectation about information and illumination was part of the problem?

To draw out the most radical conclusion from Cushman and Mestrovic: what if it is some part of the "Enlightenment," and not its failure but rather the faith we put in the informative power of images, that didn't just fail to stop what happened but allowed it to go on? What if, because the cameramen and the images were there, and because they are supposed to make a difference simply by virtue of what they showed, the disaster continued?

Hypothesis: to the extent that we imagine or take for granted the articulation between knowledge and action, which seems to define the public sphere, it is bound to fail. But what can only be thought of as a failure in those terms is, in another sense, the success of a political strategy, and if we continue to think that images by virtue of their cognitive contents, or their proximity to reality, have the power to compel action, we miss just the opening of "new fields of action" (Benjamin) that they allow.

So what if we think about this understanding of publicity not as a failure or as the re-emergence of irrationality, but as an alibi, a conceit or a consolation? These are words I borrow again from David Rieff, in Slaughterhouse, who suggests that it is this that has failed in Bosnia: a naive hope, a consolation and a conceit, the consolation of images and the dream of public information. Here's the collapsed public in a sentence: "People ... console themselves with the thought that once they have the relevant information, they will act. It is an old conceit" (41). "It was the conceit of journalists ... [:] if people back home could only be told and shown what was actually happening in Sarajevo ... then they would want their governments to do something" (216).

The conceit or fantasy of this kind of public sphere must, after Bosnia if nowhere else, contend with what we could call the rule of silence -- no image speaks for itself, let alone speaking directly to our capacity for reason. Images always demand interpretation, even or especially emotional images - there is nothing immediate about them. This implies a second rule, that of unintended consequences or misfiring - the story of Bosnia is that of images which might have signified genocide or aggression or calculated political slaughter seemed for so long to signify only tragedy or disaster or human suffering ... and hence were available for inscription or montage in a humanitarian rather than a political response. So what failed in Bosnia is an idea or an interpretation -- and a practice -- of publicity, of the public sphere as the arena of self-evidence and reason ... an idea which now must be challenged, not to put an end to the public sphere but to begin reconstituting it.

As it happened, the images were open enough to demand only that we "do something," and the problem concerns, in short, this something. The naive consolation is precisely that its content or meaning is self-evident, even analytically implied by the information itself, by "what is actually happening." And "do something" they did, in fact, something which amounted to, as Rieff puts it in the sharpest phrases of his book, "administering the Serb siege" (147) and "became accomplices to genocide" (189). The combination of the traditional tasks of peacekeeping -- which require military observers to be stationed on or between the front lines, and hence in the zone of any possible offensive military operations like air strikes -- and the new humanitarian tasks of escorting convoys across lines of confrontation meant that the "humanitarian" operation was an active impediment to any other action. Not just the "fig leaf" which Rieff too lightly calls it (189) but an affirmative choice: "the wish that there be no intervention" (176). And this project was best accomplished by undertaking the other intervention: stationing peacekeepers close enough to Bosnian Serb forces that they would either be targets of Western air strikes or easy hostages for the Serbs, and escorting the convoys that always made it necessary not to, as the UN put it, "compromise the humanitarian mandate" by antagonizing the aggressor. "This convergence of interest between the UN

and the Chetniks was not an exceptional situation," as Rieff says, but the structural law of the operation (175).

And it happened thanks to the images, from which we expected something rather different. But images, information, or knowledge will never guarantee any outcome, force or drive any action. They are, in that sense, just like weapons or words, a condition, but not a sufficient one. Still, the only thing more unwise than attributing the power of causation or of paralysis to images is to ignore them altogether. If they can condition some action -- and indeed, in Sarajevo and elsewhere, that's exactly what happened -- then it is only at the risk of this very indirection, the unexpected outcome, we might say: here, the humanitarian one. We cannot, at least not without repeating what seems to me to be the basic strategic error here, not expect the unexpected -- we cannot count on the obviousness of the image, fall for the conceit that information leads ineluctably to actions adequate to the compulsion of the image, precisely because images are so important. There is no compulsion, only interpretation and reinscription, and the image dictates nothing. This fate of the image -- left to wander and to drift from context to context, nothing but surface and frame -- is what we can call, borrowing words from Roger Cohen, its "banal violence," the banality of a "succinct accounting" on video. The image has no guaranteed meaning, and remains only to testify, to demand, to induce a responsibility -- even if, as Avital Ronell argues about the videotape of Rodney King being attacked by the LA police, "it is a responsibility that is neither alert, vigilant, particularly present, nor informed" (*Finitude's Score* 305). The responsibility of the viewer is co-extensive with the lack of self-evidence of the image: it dictates nothing, compels nothing. It can always be used, though, which is to say that it can and must always be interpreted, and the terrible failure of Bosnia was that a certain understanding of the public sphere -- "the thought that once [people] have the relevant information, they will act" -- allowed or even produced an interpretive complacency. "Surely one more picture, or one more story, or one more [...] stand-up ... would bring people around, would force them to stop shrugging their shoulders" -- nothing is less sure, less certain, precisely because we think that it is. Images never speak for themselves, never make anything in particular happen, even if they seem often to make something happen and are now indispensable in war -- but into the gap that they opened, rushed the humanitarian option, displacing all others ... which means that the accounting, however succinct, does not stop -- the image remains, without guarantees, always available for reinterpretation and reuse, of necessity the focus of an endless vigil and a struggle for reinscription. The battle takes place in public, in fact the public sphere is constituted by the irreducibility of this battle ... not the public as the last refuge of that dream or consolation of information properly acted upon, but another public, space and time, virtual and visual and nevertheless real enough, tenuous, uncertain, where everything is open to abuse and appropriation, ... shaky ground indeed.

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