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Toward a Materialist Photography

The Body of Work

Lee Mackinnon

- 1 This article is developed from a short catalogue essay 'The Body of Work', in Violet McLean and Simon Pride eds, *Glimpses from Giles Duley*, text+work, The Gallery, Arts University Bournemouth, 2015, pp 31–33.
- 2 Ariella Azoulay, *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography*, Louise Bethlehem, trans, Verso, London, 2015
- 3 Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*, Verso, London, 2010
- 4 Karen Barad, 'Matter Feels, Converses, Desires, Yearns and Remembers: Interview with Karen Barad', in Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies*, Open Humanities Press, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 2012
- 5 Azoulay, *Civil Imagination*, op cit p 23
- 6 Ibid, p 23
- 7 Ibid, pp 23–24

This article attempts to move toward a materialist photography in response to a recent photographic exhibition by Giles Duley.¹ Duley's work is made under the auspices of a 'humanitarian project', a notion that is problematised by its display in the context of the art gallery, and by the photograph as the final product in a process that is also the property of the photographer. I intend to use this work as a starting point for moving photographic discourse beyond consideration of the final image and author to explore photography as event and the materiality of the photographic apparatus. Key to this task is the work of Ariella Azoulay² and Judith Butler,³ who have approached photography as, respectively, an event and as extended materiality. It also borrows some definitions of matter and materiality from Karen Barad.⁴ Barad moves the question of materiality into a field of political interaction that takes account of all participatory elements and as such will be useful to us here.

Azoulay (2015) claims that the discourse of the photograph has become institutionalised through over-identification with the property of the photographer. This contributes to the impossibility of discussing photography as *event* or, as it might better be understood, an *unfolding*, rather than the production of a final image.⁵ As such, the event can emerge in the absence of either camera or photograph and can address, for example, the implications of an image that does not yet exist.⁶ That the photographic image has become a precondition for any discussion on photography pertains to a problematic sovereign event that is based on two principles: the first principle considers the photograph as a form of testimony; the second, that the photographer-owner is able to determine when, and if, the event of photography unfolds.⁷ Azoulay demands an

ontological account of photography that should rather ‘suspend patterns of photographic use as they have been institutionalised’.⁸ In what follows, taking the example of Duley’s recent exhibition as a starting point, I would like to expand upon the notion of photography as both an ontological and material event – to consider photography as a different kind of process from one limited to the photographic object. I implicitly contest the notion that the photographer has any more ownership over an image than, for instance, those he/she photographs, or the technical apparatus that extend the body whilst being also extended by it. In departing from the photograph as object or as the property and legacy of the photographer, the aim is to reconsider the act of photography in the particularity of its material event.

Materiality refers here to a decision to focus upon the materials of engagement, such as the processes of production and their subsequent power relations, the invisible workers who build components, and the otherwise black-boxed complexity of interactions that make the photographic event possible.⁹ To unpack such a black box is to unpack the internal complexity of technical processes that are made opaque by their own success.¹⁰ In the terms of New Materialism, within which such discourses have recently gained traction, *matter* is central and can be considered the ‘dynamic and shifting entanglement of relations rather than as a property of things’.¹¹ These entanglements are referred to by Karen Barad as ‘intra-actions’ that address the particularities of power imbalances within complex fields of agency.¹² It is in this sense that materialism can be deemed political.

Agency is defined by Barad as ‘not a property of persons or things; rather, agency is an enactment, a matter of possibilities for configuring entanglement’.¹³ Barad notes that the legacy of critique as the ‘tool of choice’ is often dismissive, rather than being engaged in the ethical practices of reading or writing.¹⁴ Indeed, the critique of images as though they are text has long privileged the language of critique over material process and ethics. How might consideration of photography as a material ontological event allow us to go beyond the well-established subject–object positions that have long underpinned photographic critique, defining the terms by which we understand it? In the first section of the article, I set about describing some features of Duley’s exhibition and work, before going on to explore a materialist approach.

DULEY AND THE MOMENT OF NORMALITY

On the advent of his recent exhibition in the gallery of the Arts University Bournemouth, ‘One Second of Light’, Duley is keen to assure us that the images focus neither upon the victims nor the events of disaster, but on ‘moments of life and normality’ in such contexts.¹⁵ We are shown a range of photographic works made between 2007 and 2015, spanning geographical locations and linked, according to the catalogue, via a context of ‘humanitarian issues’, particularly in post-conflict zones.¹⁶ Indeed, his most recent project, Legacy of War, is a two-year assignment documenting post-conflict communities globally. As if this were not work enough, he is also currently undertaking a project with the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), documenting the

8 Ibid, p 24

9 Petra Lange-Berndt *Materiality*, MIT, Massachusetts and Whitechapel, London, 2015, p 12

10 Bruno Latour *Pandora’s Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1999

11 Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Duke University Press, London, 2007, p 35

12 Barad, ‘Matter Feels, Converses, Desires, Yearns and Remembers’, op cit, p 55

13 Ibid, 54

14 Ibid, 49

15 McLean and Pride, *Glimpses from Giles Duley*, op cit

16 Giles Duley, in Mclean and Pride, *Glimpses from Giles Duley*, op cit, p 38

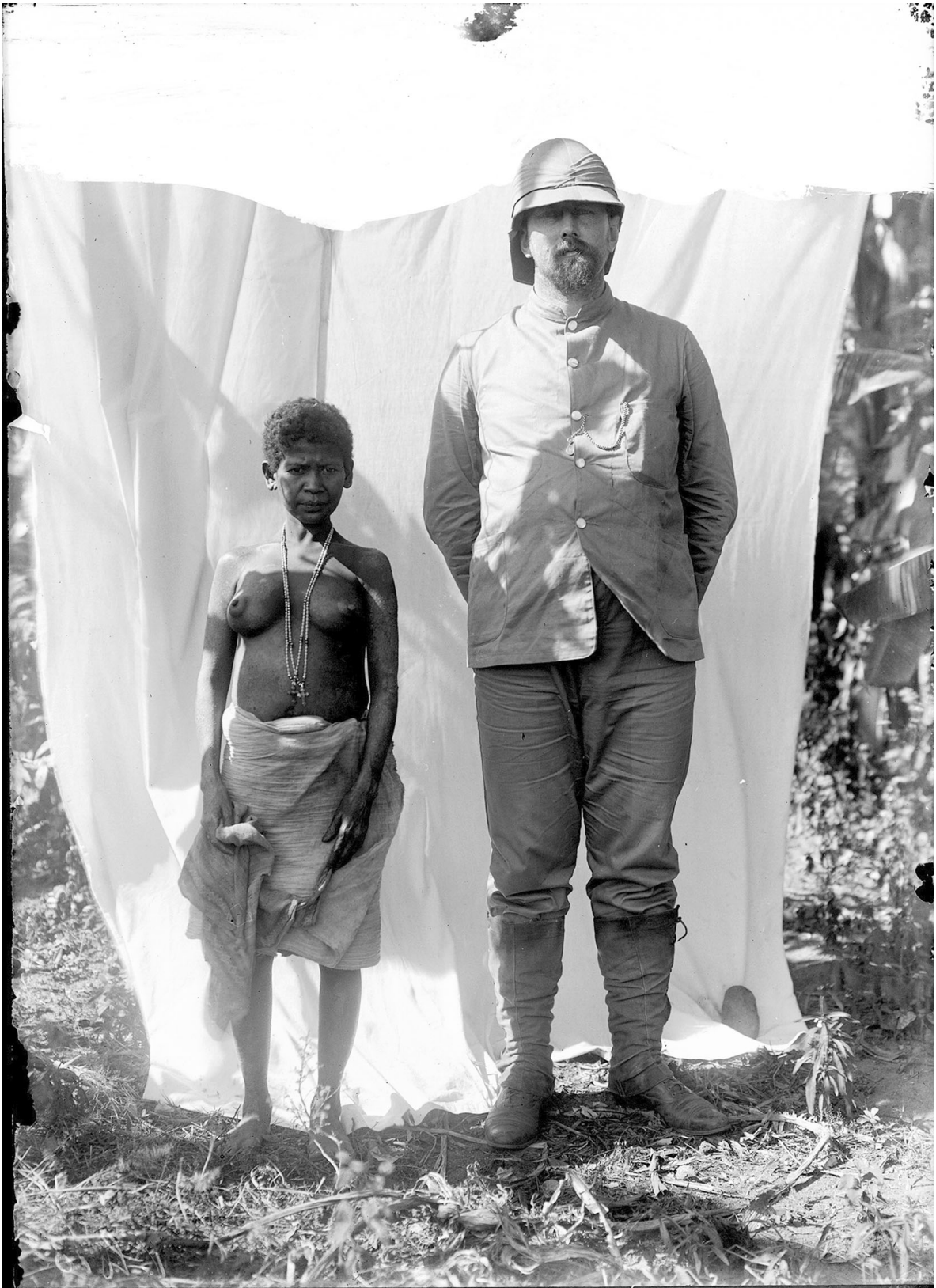
plight of refugees across the Middle East and Europe. ‘One Second of Light’ appears to feature images from both projects, as well as some previous works. Overall, the selection is rather broad and, in the context of a middle-class art college peopled largely with Caucasian male academics and Caucasian female students, conspicuously *other*. Such a context reminds us of the fact that institutions have long provided a background of *normality* against which the rest of the world and its politics can be framed or effaced accordingly. Amidst the exhibition are images of refugee camps in Jordan and Syria, exploding shells in Afghanistan, street kids from the Ukraine, Sudanese tribal groups, a Sudanese Catholic mission, Angolan soldiers, hospitalised Afghans. It is difficult then to talk about the images as a body of work in the terms posited by Duley, which is to say, not as portrayals of victims but as the inhabitants of normality. These events appear to be united by being both the direct and indirect result of colonial interest, whether of the gallery audience, the photographer, or, in many cases, the implied context of the depicted conflict and the aid agencies that follow in their wake.

The question of *normal life* and its idealised Western referent thus hovers uncomfortably throughout, not least in terms of the camera’s ability to render moments both extra-ordinary and banal. The notion of *victim* here is also a poignant one. Indeed, Duley has become as well known for the accident that nearly cost him his life as he is for his images. In 2011, Duley lost three limbs in an IED explosion whilst documenting the conflict in Afghanistan. Subsequently, his miraculous survival and newly configured body have become a frame for the consideration of those he documents, a point that I shall return to as I begin to consider the body and the photographic apparatus as constituents of the same event. The fact that Duley was himself subject to the violence that he sought to represent through its direct contrast with ‘normality’, may allude to construction of *the normal* as the result of a trauma or event that ruptures or breaks the continuity of the present. It is perhaps in this manner that the photograph itself can *normalise* whilst simultaneously pertaining to such a rupture.

In a lecture given by Duley at the launch of the exhibition, he returned to the notion of capturing *normality*, this time in relation to the composition of refugees photographed against a white background that, for me at least, empties the portraits of their context, recalling the surgical excision of the passport photograph. Here is a face that is like all other faces yet so unique in its detail that it can facilitate a sovereign function: the bodies that these faces address will either pass across borders or be detained indefinitely there. Yet, as images, they freely circulate, like tickets that return us to the idea and relief of a life reliant upon the *normality* of an asymmetrical power relation between the immobile subject of disaster and the relative mobility of the pitying viewer. Renzo Martens claims that it is pity and empathy themselves that relieve us from the consideration of structural justice.¹⁷ We are free to consume the other’s suffering as though it were itself a resource plundered to simultaneously ameliorate the ache of our complicity as consumers.

The movement from the white walls of a gallery exhibition to a featureless backdrop that can appear in war zones or refugee camps is a seamless one. Duley explains that this backdrop is the stretched white bed sheet from his hotel room, an act that might also lend itself to

17 Renzo Martens, in Joe Penney, *Enjoy Poverty: Interview with Renzo Martens*, 2010 <http://africasacountry.com/2010/07/poverty-for-sale/>



Dean Worcester, *'Negrito woman, type 5, and myself, showing relative size, full length front view'*, 1900, Dolores, Pampanga, image: courtesy of the Museum of Anthropological Archaeology, University of Michigan

documentation. The instantaneous studio provided by a bed sheet has a long history, as can be seen in the anthropological archives of Dean Worcester at the turn of the twentieth century. These images, taken in the Philippines, feature the anthropologist himself as a normalising measure against which other bodies can be judged and sorted into typologies. Indigenous vegetation highlights the expedience of Worcester's rudimentary screen, reminding us of the staging that Duley attempts to suppress. How better might we erase the distractions of foreign soil than through the crisp white sheets of hotels attuned to the European who dreams the other into existence? Hotels eliminate the noise of the unknown, keep matter in its place and reassure us of home and its starched modern roots. These roots are nourished on the fertile idea of *others* whose first function is to be *natural*, and whose subsequent function is to be pasted onto the apparent neutrality of civilizing backgrounds.

The subjects of Duley's images are the result of a violence, the exact referent of which may remain excluded from the frame yet is alluded to, not only by this very omission, but by our understanding of the photograph as the property of the camera operator and exhibiting authority. The photograph is itself an 'event' that forestalls ideas of normality even as it puts them into production, in this case, revealing photographic subjugation as part of an ongoing colonial project. Such images constitute a struggle over the ownership of identities and stories that have long been staged and appropriated by Western *auteurs* whose own battle is their complex participation in the events they wish to dispassionately record. The wish of the photographer to thus disappear into the contrivance of a neutral background is countered by the paradoxical and simultaneous authorship of a lasting photographic legacy. bell hooks has pointed out that the field of representation facilitated by photography for subjugated and colonised peoples, has long been the site of ongoing struggle.¹⁸ How might we approach Duley's desire for a photographic project that references humanitarian engagement, given such historical conditions? What if we were to approach the photographer as part of the extended apparatus and agency that constitute photographic practice in its materialist sense? In the next section, I begin to contemplate the potential agency of these combined elements as part of the event of photographic practice and as constituents of a body of work.

MATERIAL

What would a materialist theory of photography do? To think as a materialist is to acknowledge the agencies that participate in the act of making, or *taking*, a photograph. Taking a photograph indicates the extraction and exchange of certain material conditions that allow the image to come into being. Whether considering the constitutive material elements of devices that are mined, extracted or otherwise amalgamated, such as silver, aluminium, steel or oil, or the shutter at the moment of its capture in conjunction with eye, hand, body or remote automated operative, the image is made only in respect of all that has been *taken* in order to make it possible. The image thus begins its journey through numerous channels, optical and otherwise, that proceed to process it.

18 bell hooks, 'In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life', in *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*, The New Press, New York, 1995, p 57

In the introduction to her book *Frames of War*, Judith Butler suggests that we consider the ways in which cameras and their images form part of an extended materiality.¹⁹ Thus, we might:

rethink the received terms of materialism in order to understand, for instance, how cameras work as instruments of war . . . what happens if the instruments acquire their own agency, such that persons become extensions of those instruments?²⁰

To reconsider the ways in which instrumentality extends to the bodies that engage devices is to reconsider the image as, itself, a body and a device. Such thinking bestows gravity on all participants in making something as seemingly simple and ubiquitous as an image. But it also begins to demonstrate that images are not simply representations of the world about them, but that they have a direct impact upon the material conditions of being and are thus ontological. In its material consideration, the photographic image escapes its status as representation and asserts its ontological nature.²¹

Duley claims that ‘one second of light’ is the total time recorded in the images that constitute his exhibition of the same name. Each portrait is a fraction of what otherwise remains unseen. Beyond the compression of each image, space and time unfold incalculable dimensions. The photograph makes probability where there was only chance, and the photographer is a storyteller, isolating one probable course of events from many possible ones. This point has been made by Vilém Flusser, who claims that the photographic universe is ‘a chance realisation of a number of possibilities contained within camera programmes’.²² Photography’s means of realising probability is thereby a means of programming society into functionaries of the apparatus.²³ It is the task of photographic philosophy, notes Flusser, to reflect on the apparent struggle between apparatus and human and to resolve any conflicts that emerge here.²⁴ It may be that a materialist position will be best suited to achieve this, given that it re-examines the question of agency from the perspective of all constituent parties that comprise the photographic event, rather than binarising the human and the apparatus into the ‘manifestly European subject–object dialectic’.²⁵ In the photographic act, it is no longer possible to entirely disentangle one from the other. Subject and object become indistinguishable facets of a material process. The question of whether the photographic image is objective or subjective that has long constituted part of photographic discourse might better be considered in this way. In this case, the human photographer is no longer the sole agency that authors the image. Agency lends itself to all features of the photographic event as they interact, and the photographic image is a narrow section through the complex black box of such an event.

In its enveloped complexity, the photographic apparatus of the camera bears the inscription of global divisions of labour and wealth, sanctioned behind a veneer of techno-humanism. These workers are the recent permutations of corporate colonialism. Those who mine its raw materials, those who fit its components in remote sweatshops are the camera’s extended functionaries and its remote body. The camera’s construction itself thus mobilises and structures bodies into systems of value, race and class. All of these are features of the memory that photographic practices lay claim

19 Butler, *Frames of War*, op cit, p xi

20 Ibid, p x

21 See Andre Bazin, ‘The Ontology of the Photographic Image’, Hugh Gray, trans, *Film Quarterly*, vol 13, no 4, summer 1960, University of California Press, California, pp 4–9

22 Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, Anthony Mathews, trans, Reaktion Books, London, 2000, p 69

23 Ibid, p 70

24 Ibid, p 75

25 Edward Said, ‘Travelling Theory Reconsidered’, in Liz Wells, *The Photography Reader*, Routledge, London, 2003, p 252

to. Photographic memory should reconsider its claim to nostalgia as contingent Western privilege that continues the romantic project, masking the memory of labour in such technical systems. In materialist terms, memory extends beyond the pictorial surface of the image and is embedded in the core of devices and materials. To invest the surface of its resultant image with the nostalgia of the subject is an act that negates the memory held in these components, or the memory of those who were present at the event of capture and who experienced the extended context of that moment beyond the instant of its abstraction.

Neither memory nor image chart the simple narrative of a single author-protagonist, but are accumulations of actors, events, devices and perspectives whose information is fragmentary, partial and evolving. Memory is losing its linearity in the post-digital world. That memory is increasingly non-linear reflects the devices that today carry and distribute images and information. Berger once claimed that photography may be the 'prophecy of a human memory yet to be socially and politically achieved'.²⁶ In the recent extended distribution of the image through digital networks, and in the notion of the photographic as the dominant condition of the image today, we can infer the outline of such a memory,²⁷ no longer confined to the human, but the analogue of all material and technical actors. Photographic memory expands beyond the image as final destination and is embedded in the devices and event that black box the components of what can and cannot be seen.

BODY

The nineteenth-century invention of camera and photographic image can be considered an attempt to simplify the complexity of human memory, inscribing a linearity that comes to seem as natural as the construction of the individual subject. Such interventions attempt to make of life a continuous unfolding development that might negotiate and escape entropy. Indeed, the photographic apparatus, like the image, tells us something about the wish to achieve a body that is not only sovereign, but normatively constituted and continuous. The body is a field of interaction where the world takes place and, in this sense skin, like all surfaces, misleads, masking the complexity of its material interactions. We have already considered the surface of the image to be such a skin that attempts to eradicate all sense of image construction and the complexity of its attendant apparatus and materiality.

To consider a body is to isolate a set of capacities rather than to name an essence or an ideal morphology.²⁸ To call a body *disabled* is to name the disabling effects of a society upon that body.²⁹ To think the body itself as lacking or disabled is thus to remain entrenched in the notion that a body is located in an ideal set of functions that give form to the function of all other apparatuses. In turn, these apparatuses tend toward the seamless extension of such a body beyond its capacities. They extend the capacities of bodies into their environment so that the environment appears a functional extension of the body, rather than a medium upon which the body is dependent and with which it is entirely integrated. The constructed world of humans can be thought of as a series of prostheses that make an imaginary normative body invisible to itself. Such

26 John Berger, *About Looking*, Bloomsbury, London, 2009, p 61

27 Peter Osborne, 'Infinite Exchange: The Social Ontology of the Photographic Image', in *Philosophy of Photography*, vol 1 no 1, 2010, Intellect, p 62

28 Judith Butler, in Astra Taylor, et al, *Examined Life*, ICA Films and National Film Board of Canada, Montréal, 2009

29 Sunaura Taylor, *ibid*

a body is without pain and resistant to all suffering. Indeed, it can be medicated against the slightest discomfort. Emotions can be similarly obfuscated and deferred in order to deny them the physical qualities they engender. In other words, the normative body aspires to the condition of an abstraction emptied of all relationality.

The body and camera are co-operatives in the making of the image. ‘Of course,’ notes Butler,

persons use technological instruments, but instruments surely also use persons (position them, endow them with perspective, and establish the trajectory of their action); they frame and form anyone who enters into the visual or audible field.³⁰

In the case of a body reconfigured on the field of battle, there is a literal re-framing and re-forming by a conspiracy of devices that shoot, capture and distribute. These apparatuses not only form and frame the event of the body, but reconfigure the capacities and apparatus of a human subject. The body becomes a frame for the reconsideration of image and apparatus in being dismantled, and in the absolute instrumentalisation of one apparatus by another. Not an objectification, but a de-objectification; parts that are dispossessed of their function and rendered obsolete. Emerging from such a frame, a new apparatus. And an image that is not an image but a body that is becoming.

The eye, like the camera, is a conduit that filters a limited number of spectral interactions. *Seeing* has come to seem less like filtering the continuous flow and exchange of material processes, and more like a series of cuts that edit the subject into a realm screened off from direct experience. Perhaps we have done disservice to vision and the image by consigning them to a Western metaphysics invested in the logic of Cartesian duality. Thus, we anguish over whether the image is true or false, real or fake, objective or subjective. What if such critical narratives have simply naturalised certain power relations and objectifying practices as a logical matter of course rather than consigning them to the fields of action that they ought to necessitate? For example, the consignment of the image to the condition of simulacrum was a central tenet of critical writing on the photograph during the twentieth century. The photographic image, in particular, was divested of its relation to truth and rendered referent to a reality that was unreliable, fugitive and insubstantial.

To accept the photographic image as demonstrative of a moment is an underestimation of reality’s complexity rather than its own spectral disappearance. Sontag claimed that reduction of the image to the condition of simulacrum is expressive of a ‘breathtaking provincialism’ that ‘universalises the viewing habits of a small, educated population’.³¹ As a student recently reminded me, the illiterate rely on the image where the written word is unavailable.³² In this case, the image draws attention to the unreliability of the written word and to the very critical discourses that, in emptying the real of all substance, expose the unreliable abstraction of language in appropriating or representing the material world. Indeed, a materialist reading of the image is pre-empted by a number of anthropologists, who have argued that the photograph cannot be reduced to implicit meanings but pertains to particular contextual reson-

30 Butler, *Frames of War*, op cit, p xii

31 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Penguin Books, London, 2003, p 98

32 My thanks to Radha Datta for making this point so eloquently.

ance.³³ Elizabeth Edwards has redrawn the passive position often attributed to the photographed subject through presence, affect and social being, deconstructing monolithic theories of the gaze that function to close down debate.³⁴

FUGITIVE

It is the image, rather than the real, that today is fugitive and stateless. The image has become increasingly mobile, no longer respecting borders or laws. Irrespective of the intended audience or sensor, images arrive on the lip of precarious machines. They form new terrain, like a landmass emerging through generations of compressed stratification. Indeed, the photograph mirrors the refugee in a condition of statelessness, exposing the contingent space of state and subject: ‘the refugee must be considered for what [he] is: nothing less than a limit concept that radically calls into question the fundamental categories of the nation-state’.³⁵ In this sense, the refugee is a figure of anxiety because she reminds us of our own dependence upon a set of conditions that can be suspended or revoked at any moment. We too can be both within and outside the law, in the position of Kafka’s hero whereby *inclusion* is experienced as a simultaneous *exclusion* from the juridical system whose law is constantly suspended.³⁶ It is in this sense that Agamben understands the function of sovereignty – not as possession of ultimate power, but as that which stands outside the juridical order whilst also belonging to it.³⁷

The refugee demands renewal of the nation-state’s constituent categories in the service of a politics that no longer functions to divest life of its dignity by remaining in such a state of exception.³⁸ The refugee camp exemplifies Agamben’s notion that, at a certain point, the system of Western democratic principles can function only by becoming a lethal machine.³⁹ This machine claims allegiance to human rights by simultaneously rendering some excremental and superfluous. Thus, in its wish to evoke a humanitarian project that can be consumed in the context of a Western institution the photographs of Duley rely upon an understanding of the image as a final destination and arrival: the endpoint of a project that gives rise to the celebration of those very institutions that facilitate the smooth operation of this machine and its lethal executive function. The images of those excepted by states, those whose lifeless bodies are washed ashore, those who inhabit peripheral zones, the sick and infirm forced to live in makeshift tents with the flies,⁴⁰ are part of the same programme of the Western democratic apparatus and its globally vaunted freedoms. The idea of *normality*, whether of a body or a situation, is defined against a break or rupture in the operational continuum of the present, and is thus itself a way of naturalising that same lethal machine.

Images arrive unannounced, without invitation and what they tell us about ourselves needs to be addressed. The point of theory according to Said (2002), ‘is to travel, always to move beyond its confinements, to emigrate, to remain in a sense in exile’.⁴¹ Photographic images are persistent, fugitive bodies that remind us of our obligation to look, to think, and to act.

33 Christopher Pinney, *Photography and Anthropology*, Reaktion Books, London, 2011

34 Elizabeth Edwards, ‘Anthropology and Photography: A Long History of Knowledge and Affect’, *Photographies*, vol 8 no 3, 2015, pp 235–252

35 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Daniel Heller-Roazen, trans, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1998, p 134

36 Franz Kafka, ‘At the Door of the Law’, in *Stories 1904–1924*, J A Underwood, trans, Cardinal Books, London, 1981, pp 194–195

37 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, op cit, p 15

38 Ibid, p 134

39 Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino, trans, Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2000, p 43

40 Giles Duley, *The Invisible People: Unreported World*, Channel 4 News, <http://www.channel4.com/programmes/unreported-world/on-demand/58399-011>, accessed 27 January 2016

41 Said, ‘Travelling Theory Reconsidered’, op cit, p 252

Unfortunately Giles Duley did not grant permission for us to reproduce examples of his work with this article, however, an extensive selection of his work can be viewed on his website at <http://gilesduley.com/>
