

MONUMENTAL FAILURE

The Face of Bigotry

I begin with a single, though hardly singular, photograph. A group portrait of sorts, the photograph went viral in the wake of the 'Unite the Right' rally that took place in Charlottesville, Virginia on 11 August 2017. In the left foreground stands a young white man. He is caught shouting by – and perhaps for – the camera. His face glistens with sweat. This photograph is a record of outrage. It is a record of the heat produced by the bodies of young white men and the torches they carried through the campus of the University of Virginia in protest against the removal of a statue of the Confederate General Robert E Lee. Outrage turns into ecstasy before the object and the law.

This photograph is horrific, though not necessarily because of what it records. It is horrific



'Unite the Right' rally, Charlottesville, 11-12 August 2017

globalisation, homogenised and humanised. These days, a protester is anyone acting 'freely' before the state, gathering and shouting, even racial and anti-Semitic slurs, in public. Photographs like this one give representation

delivered these images into a feed. The miniature was then monumentalised; the many were transformed into the one. Self-aggrandisement begets, even covets, both surveillance and monumentalisation. After all, I am writing about this photograph because the young man was identified after it circulated on the Twitter feed 'Yes, You're Racist'. And, as the young man later told the reporters who tracked him down and made him news, he was horrified. He was not racist, he insisted, his expression of his freedom was being misrepresented. This young man was offered a platform from which to shout back at his image.

I am drawn to this photograph because it reminds me that there needs to be a discussion about the ways in which publics are made vulnerable – made to sweat – before monuments, including this photograph. The debate about monumentality, as I see it with and through this photograph, is a debate about who has the right to take up space in public. It is about a fight over the right to space, a fight manifested in the monuments being removed. In other words, this photograph materialises the crux of the so-called 'monument wars': the relationship between claims for the rights of the individual and the logic of privatisation. This was exactly what was being protested in Charlottesville last summer as well as, for example, in Ferguson, Missouri in the summer of 2014.

Ferguson, where Darren Wilson shot and killed Michael Brown on 9 August 2014, and where outraged citizens rioted for three days, is also a site for 'our' monument wars, if we come to see

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in and for its absences. There are no glory suits recorded here, no long white robes and conical hoods with full-face masks. In the age of self-aggrandisement – in the age of the selfie – it seems that even white supremacists are ready for their close-ups. Last year, historian of photography Maurice Berger in the *New York Times* called this view – for and from the camera – the 'face of bigotry'. Bigotry, Berger recognised in the face of this screaming, sweating young man, is now horrifically ordinary. It has been mainstreamed.

Offering evidence that bigotry has been normalised, this photograph also normalises acts of protest. Said differently, the 'face of bigotry' is also the 'new face of protest', to borrow the phrase Allan Sekula used in his text from 2000, 'Waiting For Tear Gas: [white globe to black]'; in order to call attention to the fact that representations of protest were no longer simply being used against protesters but, in the wake of neoliberal

to President Trump's response to the violence in Charlottesville. 'I think there is blame on both sides,' he said. 'You had a group on one side that was bad. You had a group on the other side that was also very violent. Nobody wants to say that. I'll say it right now.' This photograph is a record of neoliberal democratisation at work. In it, through it, everyone, even those who have come to represent the rejection of neoliberalism, like the young white men it pictures, are made to appear free and equal (see Larne Abse Gogarty 'The Art Right' *AM405*).

With the face of this man, protest is mainstreamed and minimised. The photograph initially circulated along with thousands of others that were produced in Charlottesville and elsewhere in the days following the protest. Hundreds of thousands of people entered the space of representation that day on a mass but also a very small scale. Phones and computers

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these wars, as this photograph instructs us to, as wars over who has the right to be a public. Said differently, history is not simply colonised, as is the case with the ‘Civil War’ monuments in the US, which, as we know, were erected in the 1920s in order to make the citizens of the towns and cities in which they stood sweat and shake and fall apart in the face of someone else’s facts. History is also deemed the work of the individual: this man, on this day, did this act, and forever changed the course of history, whether it is true or not. As the Soviet formalist Ossip Brik argued in his 1928 discussion of the ways in which photography could be employed to make a public possible in his essay ‘From Painting to the Photograph’: ‘We know that in reality Napoleon was not the central figure of the Napoleonic campaigns, and that had Napoleon not existed, the Napoleonic campaigns would have taken place all the same.’ Brik’s point, of course, was not that history is given, is bound to happen this way or that; it was that the scale with which the victors have come to write history is wholly misguided. Brik’s contemporary, Sergei Tret’iakov, put it best in his own critique of iconicity, ‘From the Photo-Series to Extended Photo-Observation’, when he noted that the photographic record’s multiplicity should ‘force [one] to radically reconsider the obsolete notion of a “human lifetime”, for our century equals a millennium in earlier times’. The goal for both media theorists was to collectivise representation and those represented. It was to produce a public sphere.

As we turn the corner on a year of commemorating, ironically, the centenary of the revolution that formalists sought to materialise, perhaps it is the right time to recognise the distance between then and now. What, for example, should we make of the claims that another revolution could be possible if we would all just stop staring at and filling up the screen with our own faces? Perhaps not much. Political activity cannot be ‘out of time’ or, rather, it cannot

be out of sync with the ways in which political activities are being enacted, choreographed, shaped and performed for, and through, the screen. Moreover, if we take Tret’iakov’s directive seriously, the distance between then and now is minuscule. More to the point, it is unmediated, as is the urgency of today’s war.

THE DEBATE ABOUT MONUMENTALITY, AS I SEE IT WITH AND THROUGH THIS PHOTOGRAPH, IS A DEBATE ABOUT WHO HAS THE RIGHT TO TAKE UP SPACE IN PUBLIC.

It is with this temporality in mind that I want to turn to a very different pronouncement about the promise of photography, one that I have been thinking about since I started reading responses to the protest in Charlottesville and calls that, as Nicholas Mirzoeff announced on his blog ‘The Situation’, ‘all the monuments must fall’. The text to which I refer is by the American physician and poet Oliver Wendell Holmes. It is his essay, published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in June 1859, ‘The Stereoscope and the Stereograph’, where Holmes’s study of the optical toy which ‘cheats the senses’ by making all surfaces ‘look solid’ closes with a rather stunning statement about photography’s uses. Holmes writes: ‘*Form is henceforth divorced from matter.* In fact, matter as a visible object is of no great use any longer, except as the mould on which form is shaped. Give us a few negatives of a thing worth seeing ... and that is all we want of it. Pull it down or burn it up, if you please ... There is only one Coliseum or Pantheon; but how many millions of potential negatives have they shed ... since they were erected! Matter in large masses must always be fixed and dear; form is cheap and transportable. We have got the fruit of creation now, and need

not trouble ourselves with the core.’

Holmes’s call for the destruction of Rome’s monuments, though metaphorical, is nonetheless real. Like the form upon which his discussion of photography riffs, namely the commodity, photographs, as Holmes understood them, subject life to a mysticism in which mediation was or became everything, subsuming all social relations. For Holmes, this was an exhilarating proposition; it was exhilarating to imagine that, as Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels had put it just a decade earlier, ‘all that is solid melts into air’. Likewise, it was exhilarating to imagine that ‘the fruit of creation’ was in ‘your’ hand, that culture – or cultures – could be simultaneous, dismantled and doubled. Now, destruction – metaphorical or otherwise – produced, easily and endlessly, monumental proxies: photographs as well as other equally cheap and ‘plastic’ forms.

‘All the monuments must fall’ is a slogan, a protest. It is a good one. It makes no exceptions. All must go. Is it, however, worth asking whether the urgent imperative fails to recognise the scale on which the war it seeks to facilitate must be in order for it to take place? Shouldn’t we be shouting on a smaller scale? I know of at least one tweet from August 2017 which did just that. Sent three days after the protest in Charlottesville, it paired a close-up of the face of the sweating young man with a close-up of another outraged, and now famous, face. Caught on 4 September 1957 in Little Rock, Arkansas, this face also shouts. It also projects racial slurs into a public space which was filled by the body of one of nine African-American teenagers seeking ‘free’ entry into Little Rock Central High School. Significantly, recollections of this protest against the school’s desegregation always included one detail: as the crowd started to form behind the girl caught in the frame, her knees began to shake (see, for example, Alex Poinsett, ‘What Happened to School Desegregation?’ in *Ebony* 1974).

Bigotry already had a public face; now it is humanised. It is ‘free’ to talk back. The photograph of this young man is not horrific because it captures his decision to act in public. It is horrific because the young black woman has been displaced. His face, reproduced over and over again, is everything. It can’t be any other way. This is not because history is scripted; it is because the logic of her displacement, both real and represented, is inseparable from the logic of his monumentalisation. The rights of the individual, rights to property, still necessitate the occlusion of black lives. This is worth shouting about. Normalised, it takes place, over and over again, on a mass but very small scale. ■

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Elizabeth Eckford pursued by a racist mob led by Hazel Bryan at Little Rock Central High School, 4 September 1957

