

Lessons of Darkness

The Roles of the Punctum and the Abject in the Traumatic Works of Christian Boltanski

By: Allen Ley, MA Art History

Since the advent of photography, images of traumatic events have had an intense effect on their viewers. Due to the photograph's intrinsic sense of indexicality, these types of images brought forth a sense of reality that was unparalleled in the established genres of painting and sculpture. In her acclaimed essay "In Plato's Cave", Susan Sontag divided her life into two parts – one before she saw photographs from the concentration camps of Bergen-Belsen and Dachau, and the other after she had seen these images.¹ Since the birth of photography, society has been and continues to be inundated with traumatic images – images of abuse, murder, torture, terrorism and genocide. It is important to comprehend how these types of photographs trigger such powerful traumatic reactions in order to better understand the psychological elements that lie beneath the surface of these types of photographic images.

In 2010, Dr. Roxanne Cohen Silver of the University of California at Irvine, along with other colleagues, directed a research study to investigate the effects of repeated viewing of traumatic media images on the mental and physical processes associated with stress.² One of the key findings of this study was that

exposure to graphic and traumatic media images may be an important mechanism through which the impact of collective trauma is widely dispersed. Although this study was conducted with the hope of understanding medical conditions such as post-traumatic stress, actual theoretical models of how these images can affect viewers were not investigated as part of the study. How do traumatic images like photographs work on an unconscious level to induce stress in the viewer? What could happen when an artist purposefully modifies photographic images in an attempt to heighten this type of response? These questions, when placed alongside the results of the psychological study, create a window of opportunity to construct an intersection between this study and the disciplines of Art History and Psychoanalysis. Using photographic installation works by the French artist Christian Boltanski, this paper will examine how Roland Barthes' concept of the punctum and Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection can be joined together to form a theoretical model to explain the dramatic impact of traumatic images.

Christian Boltanski was born in Paris on September 6, 1944, to a Ukrainian Jewish father and a Corsican mother shortly after the

liberation of France at the end of World War II. Boltanski's developmental years were marked by the Nazi occupation of France, which forced his father to go into hiding beneath the floorboards of their family home after publicly staging a divorce from his wife, who was a Catholic. Boltanski grew up having to deal with wariness and close scrutiny from the world around him, forcing him to self-fashion a type of split identity that reflected a young man caught between the beliefs of his Catholic mother and the suffering of his Jewish father.³ In 1958, after leaving school around the age of 12, he began to create artistic works whose themes centered on macabre historical subjects. Boltanski began his career as a painter, but ultimately decided to create works that used media such as photography and sculpture, as well as ephemera materials including postcards and newspapers, and family photo albums that are traditionally found in quotidian places. His work addresses issues of loss, memory, childhood, and death, and often function as memorials or shrines to collective cultural memories and events. Many of his installations reference lives that were lost during the Holocaust, echoing personal as well as public memories.⁴ Although Boltanski himself was not a victim of the Holocaust atrocities, the memories that were handed down to him through family oral and narrative stories and histories, place him within the model of the 'postmemory artist' that has been advanced by scholar Marianne Hirsch. She locates the postmemory artist within the "generation after", a position which provides them with a "unique relationship to the personal, collective and cultural trauma of those who came before."⁵ What is unique about this method of memory transference is that experiences are transferred to the second generation of survivors. They can be so

overwhelming and traumatic that they unsettle the memory process by generating the feeling that these transferred remembrances are ultimately part of their own discrete memories. Applying Hirsch's model to an artist like Boltanski, we are presented with an individual whose relationship to his past is "mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection and creation."⁶

The unique way that Boltanski uses these seemingly harmless objects has led viewers and critics alike to abandon the idea that his installations are being presented in a straightforward, honest fashion as traditional historical narratives. Instead, they are realizing that Boltanski has in fact appropriated the role of a Holocaust historian and reframed the traditional archive as an artistic practice.⁷ The photographs that he uses in his installations are a unique form of appropriation as well, as they are not, in fact, true images of Holocaust survivors. Instead, they are random photographs of living people that, in the process of becoming part of Boltanski's art, are imbued with new context and meaning. This can be seen as a type of response to the ideas of Theodor Adorno. In his essay "Commitment," Adorno writes of the dangers inherent in works of art (similar to those produced by Boltanski), arguing that works that endeavor to represent unimaginable atrocities can cause a transformation in the work by the very act of assigning new meaning to it.⁸ In using this type of fictive archive of photographs and everyday objects, Boltanski ultimately creates works that the art historian Ernst Van Alphen describes as creating a "sense of Holocaust" rather than being a direct representation of the atrocities committed by Nazi Germany.⁹ In doing so, Boltanski emphasizes the inherent relationship between photography, memory and death. As Lynn Gumpert has noted, photographs,

like memory, fade and perish in their own unique way as they are constructed from paper.¹⁰

In the late 1980s, Christian Boltanski created a travelling installation, entitled *Lessons of Darkness*, which toured various major galleries in the United States in order to increase his exposure with American audiences. Within this installation were several individual installations from his earlier European exhibitions, each one taking on the structure of a public memorial. The works from this exhibition, such as *Autel de Lycée Chases* (Furnace Bridge of Chases High School) from 1986-97 mimic the form of public memorials, yet they are not constructed from conventional memorial materials, such as stone and marble (Figure 1). In this particular work, Boltanski uses small black and white photographs of children that are framed with tin and mounted on the gallery wall in geometrical patterns. They, in turn, are encircled by small, incandescent light bulbs. Boltanski uses layers of tangled black wire that lead to the small lamps to disrupt the symmetrical ordering of the images.¹¹ As Sergio Troisi has noted, these photographs (usually close-ups in which the shot seldom pans out to incorporate the shoulders or whole bust) are undoubtedly a *memento mori* where the perceived truth of the photographic image – its instantaneousness, its transitory movement – is turned upside down into its corresponding opposite, and the faces warily seem to materialize from the unforgiving passing of time.

Boltanski often submits these photographs to a procedure involving multiple reproductions, re-photographing them numerous times until the figures' distinctive features soften and their faces become a vague arrangement of light and shadow. In most of the photographs, the eyes are the

element that draws the viewer's gaze as the mouths and other facial features have been blurred, creating what appears to be a photographic "cemetery of turreted tombstones."¹² Yet even with this process, which mimics falsification and fiction, Boltanski takes full advantage of the indexical power inherent to the photographic image. As Sontag has argued: "the picture may distort; but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist."¹³ I would argue that Boltanski, in works such as this, directly manipulates the photograph to control what ultimately pierces and traumatizes the gallery visitor. In beginning to articulate a theoretical model that could serve as a way to explain traumatic reactions to works such as these, I would argue that it is the unique nature of photography that allows Boltanski to create works that induce traumatic reactions, and that this powerful effect can be framed within the photographic theories of Roland Barthes as outlined in his book *Camera Lucida*.

Within the pages of this book, Barthes identifies two distinct elements that can be found in photographs – the studium and the punctum. The studium, according to Barthes, signifies the wide range of meanings found in a photograph that are readily accessible and discernible to any viewer. The punctum, a Latin word that is derived from the Greek word for trauma, is a much more personal and intense element of the photograph. He describes it as something that pierces the viewer: "that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)."¹⁴

Near the beginning of his book, Barthes states that what he is looking to define is a "history of looking."¹⁵ In the process of creating this history, he tries to explain the role of emotion and subjectivity that he finds embodied within the frame of the

photograph. For Barthes, the quintessential characteristic of photography is the occasion, or the moment in time that has been captured on film. The photograph is never separable from what he defines as its referent – a term he uses to denote that which the photograph represents. He takes this line of thought further by stating that the subject – the person being photographed – is transformed into an object by the very act of photography, and in effect becomes “death in person.”¹⁶ In analyzing *Camera Lucida*, the scholar Graham Allen writes that photographs, for Barthes, “do not provide a direct analogy between an image and a referent; rather, they testify to the reality of that which has died or is going to die.”¹⁷

Barthes uses a particular traumatic photograph in his book that heightens this significant observation when combined with the essence of horror. He discusses in detail a photograph of Lewis Payne, a man charged with assassinating the former Secretary of State, W.H. Seward, which was taken mere moments before Payne was to be executed (Figure 2). This image shows the upper body of a man leaning against the wall of his cell, with the full knowledge of the fate that awaits him in a matter of minutes. He stares vacantly out into the space around him. His staring eyes are the punctum, that which provokes an uncomfortable and traumatic tension in Barthes, as well as others who view the image today while reading his book. The indexicality of the photograph convinces us that the man in the photograph is alive, even though we are in possession of the knowledge that Payne is about to die a horrific death. Yet, even as we look at the image today, we are already aware of the fact that he is dead; his bones lying alongside the others whom he has joined in the underground kingdom of the dead. As Barthes writes:

The photograph is handsome, as is the boy: that is the studium. But the punctum is: he is going to die. I read at the same time: this will be and this has been; I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake. By giving me the absolute past of the pose, the photograph tells me death in the future. What pricks me is the discovery of this equivalence.¹⁸

In the end, according to Barthes, photographic images do not provide a direct correlation between the actual image and the subject that is contained within. Instead, they attest to the reality of what is already, or will eventually die. It is Barthes’ ultimate focus on death, particularly when contained in the traumatic image such as the photograph of Payne, that leads me to argue that there is a clear link between his concept of the punctum and the sensation of abjection that the French psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva outlines in her groundbreaking book *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*.

Julia Kristeva, a former protégé of Barthes’, argued that the state of abjection is fundamentally a crisis of subjecthood. Building upon earlier psychoanalytic theories that had been published by Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, Kristeva argues that there is a fundamental division between notions of the subject and the object. For her, the subject is equated with the self, which encompasses all that a person believes is fundamental to the individual personal identity, both physically and psychologically. That which exists outside the realm of the subject, or personal self, can be considered an object or thing that is embodied by concept of the “other.” When a psychological rupture occurs that breaks down the boundaries that define and separate

subject and object, it triggers a physical reaction and an unsettling emotional response. Abjection defines the process used to reestablish the boundaries between subject and object by casting out that which disturbs, with the quintessential example being the human corpse: a subject turned into an unsettling object. The abject, then, is that which exists in the liminal space between subject and object. The process of abjection in the subject has only one key link to the object, which she defines as “that of being opposed to *I*.”¹⁹

Kristeva discusses the human corpse at length. The human being retains its identity as an individual or subject, but progressively returns to the state of being an object, decomposing to become part of the earth. She writes:

The corpse, seen with God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us.²⁰

Kristeva, like Susan Sontag, also makes specific reference to the atrocities of the Nazi regime, stating that “the abjection of Nazi crime reaches its apex when death, which, in any case, kills me, interferes with what, in my living universe, is supposed to save me from death: childhood, science, among other things.”²¹ In his powerful book *Auschwitz and Afterimages*, Nicholas Chare builds on Kristeva’s comments regarding the Nazi atrocities by discussing the role of abjection that is created by the punctum in traumatic images that reference the atrocities of the

concentration camps. In writing about the photographic images, he argues that it is:

[i]n the disquiet and unease it arouses because it carries abjection to the viewer, thereby rendering them intimate with it, is vitally important. In its capacity to embody the horror...it provides a crucial means of access to the abject experience of the camps.²²

Putting these two individual theories from Barthes and Kristeva together, I argue that it possible to form a composite model that defines a hybrid process where both experiences not only co-exist, but occur at the same time. For Barthes, the photographed subject becomes an object, in essence becoming a personification of death. I argue that this links directly with Kristeva’s definition of the ultimate form of abjection that occurs during the process of death – the moment when a subject begins to transform into an object. I argue that both theories form a model that explains the traumatic reaction to images that depict death and other atrocities, as the viewer is ultimately forced into a psychoanalytical space where the boundary between subject and object is dissolved. This leaves the viewer exposed to the empty space created by the absence of this barrier that is replaced with the foreboding presence of death.

As the critic Hal Foster has noted in analyzing the world of postmodern and contemporary art, “if there is a subject for the cult of abjection at all...[it is] the Corpse.”²³ Foster has written significantly on the process of abjection in contemporary art. Drawing on Jacques Lacan’s seminar *The Unconscious and Repetition*,²⁴ Foster concludes that works that are repetitive in nature, such as Boltanski’s installations, are at their very core sources of both trauma and abjection. Lacan

described the notion of the traumatic as a missed encounter with the real, and that in being “missed,” the real cannot actually be represented – it can only, and must be, repeated.²⁵ Foster, via Lacan, complicates this even further by arguing that even though the repetitive nature of works by Boltanski serve as a type of “screen,” the “real” ruptures this image-screen and removes any form of protection for the viewer from the abject and the traumatic. This rupture is a form of trauma, or crisis, and results in either the creation of a site of attack for artists where they can force the rupture to occur, or, for artists like Boltanski, where there is an inherent assumption that a rupture is already in existence, a site where they can poke and prod behind it for the abject “object-gaze of the real.”²⁶

One of Newton’s laws of motions states that for every action, there is an opposite reaction of equal strength and force. Therefore, I would argue that as the punctum causes an abject reaction in the viewer of traumatic images, this act of abjection equally returns the force by further amplifying the punctum for the viewer; in effect, there is an equal reciprocity between the two concepts that could be represented by the following diagram:



I support this part of my argument by returning to the theories of Lacan. According

to Lacan, when there is a rupture in the screen that reveals ‘the real’, it creates a traumatic point that he refers to as the *tuché*.²⁷ Hal Foster equates and connects Lacan’s thesis directly to Barthes’ definition of the *punctum*, arguing that the two ideas are one and the same. In turning to *Camera Lucida* for validation, Barthes writes that the punctum is the element that “rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me,” he continues, “it is what I add to the photograph and what is nonetheless already there.”²⁸ He later builds on this by stating: “It is acute yet muffled, it cries out in silence. Odd contradiction, a floating flash.”²⁹

I would argue that the hybrid model I have outlined in this paper could be used to explain the medical symptoms that were discovered during the process of the Irvine study. I would also argue that this model represents a powerful weapon in the artist’s toolbox, where an artist like Boltanski can assume a very powerful role in forcing the viewer to see beyond the fiction and feel a specific emotion. I would also argue that the trigger that causes this reaction to occur could be linked to Hirsch’s model of postmemory, in that the trauma that is triggered by the postmemory experience sets the unconscious psychological stage for the traumatic reaction between the punctum and the abject. I would also argue that this is not only happening to Boltanski, but that Hirsch’s model could be expanded to include postmemories that occur on the collective and cultural levels as well as viewers who experience his work.

To use a test case to evaluate this model, I turn to Brett Ashley Kaplan who dedicated a portion of his book *Unwanted Beauty* to describing his experience of viewing Boltanski’s photographic installation *Monument: Les enfants de Dijon* (1985),

which was on display at Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art in the fall of 2002 (Figures 3, 4).³⁰ He described entering a shadowy and somber room where he found himself face to face with numerous black-and-white photographs of the faces of children. Each photograph was surrounded by three small light bulbs, which immediately made Kaplan think of altars to the dead. The wires attached to the lights also caused Kaplan to have a traumatic reaction, as he began to imagine devices of torture and death. Even though the children in these images were unknown to him, he was immediately traumatized as though he were standing in front of a memorial or a gravesite. The longer Kaplan looked at these photographs, the more he noticed that his own memories of dead relatives were intruding into his thoughts, as well as postmemory echoes of the horrors that were suffered in the concentration camps. He felt all of this and more, even though he knew that the photographs were shot in 1973 and that the subjects were all likely still alive. I argue that Boltanski effectively created an installation where, in manipulating the punctum to force the experience of abjection, trauma was able to trump reality.

To further substantiate and underscore my argument, I will let Boltanski's own words speak for themselves. In a 1989 interview, Georgia Marsh asked Boltanski why he felt compelled to create art that embodied what

she referred to as a "declaration of the dead." He responded to the question with an answer that echoes the vernacular of both Barthes and Kristeva by saying:

I don't really know myself. We are all so complicated and then we die. We are a subject one day, with our vanities, our loves, our worries, and then one day, abruptly, we become nothing but an object, an absolutely disgusting pile of shit. We pass very quickly from one stage to the next. It's very bizarre. It will happen to all of us, and fairly soon too. Suddenly we become an object you can handle like a stone, but a stone that was someone.³¹

In the end, Barthes and Boltanski use the photographic punctum to remind us of our own fragility and our limited time on this earth. Boltanski, like Kristeva, also remind us of how abject our feelings about this short journey are, when we are confronted by visual evidence that proves and solidifies our limited temporality, be it in the actual human corpse, or the photographic images that creates the uneasy, horrific feeling inside when we are confronted by them. Abjection caused by traumatic images is both a sudden and constant reminder of our short and tenable journey between birth and death, or to use Joni Mitchell's more abject description - the journey "between the forceps and the stone."³²

Notes

¹ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 20.

² A full summary of the study and its key findings were published in Roxane Cohen Silver, E. Alison Holman, Judith Pizarro Andersen, Michael Poulin, Daniel N. McIntosh and Virginia Gil-Rivas, “Mental and Physical Health Effects of Acute Exposure to Media Images of the September 11, 2001, Attacks and the Iraq War”, *Psychological Science* 24, no. 9 (2013): 1623-1634.

³ Donald Kuspit, “In the Cathedral/Dungeon of Childhood: Christian Boltanski’s Monument,” in Didier Semin, Donald B. Kuspit, Christian Boltanski, and Tamar Garb, *Christian Boltanski* (London: Phaidon, 1997), 99.

⁴ Lynn Gumpert and Mary Jane Jacob, *Christian Boltanski: Lessons of Darkness* (Chicago: Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art, 1988), 10.

⁵ Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 5.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ernst Van Alphen, “Visual Archives as Preposterous History”, *Art History* 30, no. 2 (2007): 366.

⁸ Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. by E.B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1990), 88.

⁹ Van Alphen, “Visual Archives,” 368.

¹⁰ Lynn Gumpert and Christian Boltanski, *Christian Boltanski* (Paris: Flammarion, 1994), 80.

¹¹ Ibid., 83.

¹² Sergio Troisi, *Boltanski Montedipietà* (Milan: Chartra, 2002), 31.

¹³ Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, 4.

¹⁴ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1980), 27.

¹⁵ Ibid, 12.

¹⁶ Ibid, 14.

¹⁷ Graham Allen, *Roland Barthes* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 142.

¹⁸ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 29.

¹⁹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 1.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Nicholas Chare, *Auschwitz and Afterimages: abjection, witnessing and representation* (New York: Tauris and Co., 2011), 150.

²³ Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, The MIT Press, 1996), 166.

²⁴ This seminar can be found in its entirety in Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton, 1981).

²⁵ Foster, *The Return of the Real*, 132.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 156.

²⁷ Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 53.

²⁸ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 26.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 55.

³⁰ A full description of Kaplan's experience can be found in Brett Ashley Kaplan, *Unwanted Beauty: Aesthetic Pleasure in Holocaust Representation* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 127-130.

³¹ Georgia Marsh, "The White and the Black: An Interview with Christian Boltanski," *Parkett* 22 (1989), 32.

³² Joni Mitchell, "Hejira," from *Joni Mitchell: The Complete Poems and Lyrics* (Crown Publishers, 1997), 168.

Images

Figure 1. Christian Boltanski, *Autel de Lycée Chases [Furnace Bridge of Chases High School]*, 1986-1987, 6 photographs, 6 desk lamps and 22 tin boxes, 67 x 84.5 in. (170.2 x 214.6 cm) http://www.rfc.museum/images/stories/BtC/Boltanski-C/Boltanski-C_Autel_de_Lycees_Chases.jpg

Figure 2. Photography of Lewis Payne, as included in the book: Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida*. New York: Picador, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981. <http://thinkingphotographs.files.wordpress.com/2014/05/mugshot1.jpg?w=600>

Figure 3. Christian Boltanski, *Monument: Les Enfants de Dijon*, 1986, Fifty black and white and color photographs with one hundred fifty lights, Photographs: 11x 9 ½ in. (28 x 24 cm) to 15 ¾ x 19 ¾ in. (40 x 50 cm). http://archive.newmuseum.org/media/newmuseum/images/3/4/23610_ca_object_representations_media_3406_large.jpg

Figure 4. Christian Boltanski, detail, *Monument: Les Enfants de Dijon*, 1986, Fifty black and white and color photographs with one hundred fifty lights, Photographs: 11x 9 ½ in. (28 x 24 cm) to 15 ¾ x 19 ¾ in. (40 x 50 cm). http://images.tate.org.uk/sites/default/files/styles/grid-normal-8-cols/public/images/boltanski_monument_enfants_dijon_0.jpg?itok=iaxM7vNK