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## The Images to Come: On Showing the Future without Losing One's Head

### Abstract:

The paper discusses the possibility of a cinematic image which represents future catastrophes, while avoiding ideological entrapments and self-serving fantasies. Taking a Japanese ghost story and a brief note by Walter Benjamin as his dual starting point, the author first attempts to define the possible dangers inherent to the very idea of showing the future, the most important being the danger of the premature, cathartic discharge of the spectator's anxiety in a sadistic/voyeuristic show. After discussion of the mechanisms of this discharge, the author offers an analysis of a positive example, namely Michael Haneke's *Time of the Wolf*. According to the analysis, Haneke manages to avoid the traps by constructing reflective images that make the spectators watch themselves as they are searching in vain for the cathartic images of the catastrophe.

### Keywords:

Michael Haneke, image, futurity, Walter Benjamin, psychoanalysis

*For Paweł Mościcki*

Let me begin with a story. It can be found among the Japanese ghost tales collected by Lafcadio Hearn. In the story, aptly and wittily titled *Diplomacy*, a man is about to be executed by the nobleman he has disobeyed. The convict threatens the samurai that he will haunt his palace after death. The nobleman asks for a proof that it is possible. Namely, he demands that after the man's head is cut off it should bite a particular stone which lies in the yard. The man accepts the challenge. The samurai cuts his head off with his sword. The head rolls and bites

the stone. Understandably, the courtiers are terrified. For months they live in fear. Finally, they decide to ask their master to order a religious service on behalf of the man's spirit. The calm lord rejects their suggestion as unnecessary. He explains:

Only the very last intention of that fellow could have been dangerous; and when I challenged him to give me the sign, I diverted his mind from the desire of revenge. He died with the set purpose of biting the steppingstone; and that purpose he was able to accomplish, but nothing else. All the rest he must have forgotten. ... So you need not feel any further anxiety about the matter.

The story ends with a solid confirmation of the nobleman's argument: "And indeed the dead man gave no more trouble. Nothing at all happened."<sup>1</sup>

This highly sarcastic story, in which a sign of what is to come uses all the energy of the future event and thus effectively precludes what it was to anticipate, then finds its interesting parallel in a meditation embedded in a very different cultural tradition. What I have in mind is one of the fragments that can be found in Walter Benjamin's aphoristic *One-Way Street*. In the section titled *Madame Ariane – Second Courtyard on the Left*, Benjamin reflects upon the very idea of fortune-telling. Playfully and interestingly, he avoids both an enlightenment-inspired refutation of the practice and its superstitious affirmation. Rather, assuming a paradoxical perspective which unexpectedly makes him an ally of the anonymous narrator of the Japanese ghost story retold by Lafcadio Hearn, Benjamin suggests that the very act of fortune-telling and reading the signs of the future events discharges the bodily energy needed for the future action that would make the events actually take place. Thus, the event would have or at least could have happened – if not for the fact that we have read the augury! The premonitions, left unread, still keep the potential and thus, though vague, paradoxically form a more accurate anticipation of the future. Here are Benjamin's own words:

He who asks the fortune-tellers the future unwittingly forfeits an inner intimation of coming events that is a thousand times more exact than anything they may say... . Omens, presentiments, signals pass day and night through our organism like wave impulses. To interpret them or to use them, that is the question. The two are irreconcilable. Cowardice and apathy counsel the former, lucidity and freedom the latter. For before such a prophecy or warning has been mediated by word or image it has lost its vitality, the power to strike at our centre and force us, we scarcely know how, to act accordingly. If we neglect to do so, and only then, the message is deciphered. We read it. But now it is too late.<sup>2</sup>

In this remarkable note Benjamin suggests – rather optimistically – that the unread premonitions can indeed lead to successful action. Soberly and sourly we may add that, brilliant as Benjamin's meditation may be, this particular statement is surely unfalsifiable: we can only know what exactly could have happened once we have read the signs and thus precluded the events from happening. Following this darker path of reasoning we might further suggest that it is not only the question of knowledge, but also of the very possibility of action: it may be that the very chance for the truly groundbreaking line of action manifests itself only as always-already missed. Benjamin himself would not accept this paradox, at least not at this relatively optimistic stage of his intellectual development. At the very end of the note on *Madame Ariane* he writes in an ecstatic mode: "Each morning the

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1) Hearn, *Kwaidan*, 31.

2) Benjamin, *One-Way Street*, 482–483.

day lies like a fresh shirt on our bed; this incomparably fine, incomparably tightly woven fabric of pure prediction fits us perfectly. The happiness of the next twenty-four hours depends on our ability, on waking, to pick it up.”<sup>3</sup> In a much bleaker vein we could respond: “Perhaps. However, due to the irreducible awkwardness of our material bodies, due to the very unsurmountable split between the perfectly fitting vision and the roughness of physical reality, at the moment of waking we first roll over the fresh shirt of the day, wrinkle it, smash it, and only then see what we could have done if not for clumsiness!”

Even when modified along these sarcastic lines, Benjamin's note (clearly rooted in a Nietzschean idea of the tension between knowing and acting)<sup>4</sup> seems to refer mostly to our capabilities of achieving or at least promoting our happiness. In the present paper, however, I am interested in this note; and more particularly in the paradoxical relation it establishes between the sign of a coming event and the event itself as a starting point for a rather simple argument on the possible ways of talking about and imaging future disasters. For some time now, responding to the general fears and the painfully actual developments, the so-called cultural industry has been producing science-fiction movies showing the coming disaster, from *The Day After Tomorrow* to *The Road* based on Cormac McCarthy's prose. Perhaps more interesting than these Hollywood productions was the more recent Netflix anthology *Black Mirror*, a sequence of short TV films, each showing some dark consequences of new technology, especially of various means of communication and the Internet itself. Usually much better than the Hollywood block-busters, the *Black Mirror* episodes themselves are obviously of different quality. Surely, the more familiar the technology used in a particular episode, the more frightening the image we see in the *Black Mirror*. Conversely, if the technology is too advanced, we can safely watch the movie as a purely aesthetic production which pleases us or not, but does not affect us as a direct warning.

This is rather obvious. However, it is much more difficult to put one's finger on, and accurately describe, the ideological falsification inherent in the series as such: a deceptive moment which seems to trouble even the wisest and most striking of these images of the catastrophe to come – and perhaps the wiser ones even more than the others. Certainly, the images do not simply draw our attention away from the possible disaster that we may easily soon encounter on our way. They do not deceive us with visions of bliss resulting from advanced technology. Moreover, in the earlier, more British-minded seasons, they even deny us the relief of the happy end. And yet they do lie. The fact that they do can be inferred from the very excitement that at least some of the spectators, myself included, feel when watching them.

A rather complex mechanism seems to be responsible for the production of the excitement. What we watch on the screen are usually poor victims of technological development: victims of machines or communication systems controlled by evil corporations/politicians or just set loose and running amok, whatever the intentions of their original constructors may have been. We pity the victims yet we clearly get excited about their miserable fate. Part of the enjoyment is the usual narcissistic pleasure we gain from any form of pity which has two distinct but complementary sources: on the one hand we pity ourselves projected on the victim on the screen, on the other hand we feel better as the ones who are big enough to feel the pity. Thus, we are both the embraced child and the embracing parent. Fair enough. But in this case – when watching humans falling prey to the grim effects of technology – another, more specific element seems to be at play. Our excitement is of sadistic kind, but it is sadism by proxy, sadism which has been voyeuristically displaced. We watch technology: an ultimately subjectless power of our own making; entrap, oppress and/or massacre fragile human beings. Something does it for us and we watch it on the screen. We seemingly identify with the victim but on a deeper level we are the spectators of the sadistic show in which our own fear, namely the fear of our own fragile bodies and selves

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3) Ibid.

4) Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages*, 57–123.

confronted with technology, is translated into the aggression directed against the human being on the screen. It is not simply that we identify with the inhuman aggressor, but we watch the show from its point of view while enjoying the fact that we can deny our complicity. Therefore, the more we fear (the more convincing the episode), the more excitement we gain. Meanwhile, our own responsibility for the technological process gets lost on the way or remains only in the form of narcissistic self-pity: “Oh Mommy, look, what have I done! Will you still love me?” All in all, then, this peculiar mechanism of excitement can be identified as a libidinal dance of fear turning into aggression which gets discharged in a sadistic show, which we enjoy as seemingly compassionate voyeurs, with the additional touch of narcissistic satisfaction gained from pity and self-pity as well.

Now, the whole process results in a curious effect which is not unrelated to the Japanese ghost story and Benjamin’s meditation I began with. Namely, our fearful premonitions get neutralized not so much by their denial or repression, but – much more effectively and interestingly – by their very anticipation within the aesthetic image. Of course, unlike in the Japanese story or in Benjamin, it does not mean that the disaster will not come because we have seen it represented. Rather, more viciously, for the time being, we feel we have lived through a catharsis and we are purified of our fear. In other words, whatever we say while discussing this or that episode with our friends, while stressing the plausibility of a scenario and getting excited about how dark our future is, we effectively act as if the catastrophe has already come and passed safely. It is as if our dark expectations were prematurely realized and libidinally discharged within the sphere of aesthetic image. Above all and details aside, this is possible due to the character of the images which results from the very idea of a TV series: the necessary simplifications, the hyperbolic solutions, the abbreviation of time which frees us from the burden of development and finally, and perhaps most importantly, a clear-cut pathos of the ending which leaves us with the immense satisfaction we feel in the face of sublime catastrophe. Meanwhile, the true catastrophe, much more awkward than any screen image, a slow and boring disaster which cannot be so easily squeezed into a one hour episode with a clear-cut plot and bang-like ending, is steadily proceeding.<sup>5</sup>

In his meditation on fortune-telling Benjamin speaks of both images and words as capable of discharging the energy of the future event. Is it true also in the realm that we are exploring now? It would seem that a commonsensical distinction in relation to images and words could or even should be drawn in this case. Let me illustrate what I mean with a reference to a seemingly distant example. As some of the readers know all too well, a Polish LGBT activist was recently accused of offending religious feelings for sticking certain posters in the streets of Płock. The posters showed a representation of Virgin Mary with the Child – in fact, a reproduction of the Częstochowa icon which is central to Polish Catholic imagery – with a rainbow halo over the heads of the mother and the baby. Leaving aside most aspects of this both utterly ridiculous and extremely frightening affair, one may reasonably argue that if the activist had published a poster with a slogan reading, say, “Those who worship the Częstochowa Virgin Mary should embrace LGBT people as well,” she might have caused a minor scandal but she would have been less likely to risk an accusation of offending religious feelings. (Although, of course, you never know; especially in Poland, especially now). If one argues that this is because

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5) This criticism is obviously all too general to question all the merits of particular episodes of the *Black Mirror* series. Moreover, the argument ignores the fact that the most important episodes deal with media and communication technologies themselves, and the authors of the series manifest high level of reflexivity concerning the very medium they are working in. Thus, some of the episodes most insightfully discuss both the enslavement and the violence of spectatorship as such. However, the hyperbolic abbreviation characteristic of the very genre shows its treacherous nature also in this dimension. While drawing us into the exciting play of watching the very images as the medium of subjection (sometimes of the one who is watched, sometimes of the one who watches), the all too vivid and clear-cut TV images screen off from our view their own soft power of day-by-day enslavement which is rarely as picturesque as the one that they show as their actual content. In this sense one may say that the ultimate effect of the images showing the future enslavement by images is, paradoxically, to veil themselves!

the image is considered to be sacred, such an answer only begs the question; for one still needs to explain why such a sanctity is possible in the first place. Well, the answer is still pretty evident though: in case of images we are more likely to take the representation for the thing represented than in the case of words, even if names also tend to be surrounded by a halo of sanctity. This simple fact is responsible for an interesting temporal aspect of the affair. The image with Rainbow Madonna seems to be performing something, doing something to Mary herself in the present moment, whereas the verbal slogan seems to be an appeal (a promise, an expression of hope) directed toward the future to come. This illustration may suggest that also the mechanism I have been describing, namely the mechanism of the premature discharge of anxious expectation due to contact with a representation of the coming event, is much more active in case of images than in case of words. An image – say, a *Black Mirror* episode – produces the illusionary effect of a coming event having been already realized in the present moment, whereas a verbal discussion of the coming dangers would still keep the futurity of the described future intact. Thus, it would seem that showing the future tends to ideologically neutralize our expectations and hence, perhaps, some responsible action, whereas talking about it enables us to avoid this trap.

However, this simple iconoclastic conclusion surely needs to be qualified in many different ways. Firstly, it should be noted that the same excitement I have been identifying in the spectator of the *Black Mirror* series can be found in the soul of the reader of dark science fiction stories as well. The play of images and emotions that literary narrative is able to trigger in its own way may perhaps result in a similar if not the same premature discharge of expectations. Secondly, the aspect of verbal representation of future which – crudely and very roughly speaking relies less on imagining and more on conceptualizing the future – may hide a trap of its own. While seemingly avoiding the effect of the imaginary or image discharge – and perhaps even iconoclastically denying the desirability or possibility of a visual representation of the future catastrophe – the perspective which relies on the conceptual discussion of the disaster may easily give us the illusion of a conceptual grasp of and control over the uncontrollable; and so it makes us feel much better than we should, after all. In this case, the defensive mechanism of the libidinal discharge within the sphere of images is replaced by the equally defensive fantasy of omnipotence based on conceptual control.

Most importantly, though, it needs to be noted that the realm of images itself has its own ways of blocking the mechanism of the premature discharge of fear. Moreover, it may well be that it is within this very realm rather than within the realm of words that we should look for representations of the future disasters: representations that are capable of making us confront our anxieties without neutralizing them all too quickly. Let me conclude my argument with an example of this mechanism.

The illustration I have in mind is the film by Michael Haneke titled *Time of the Wolf* (2003). Certainly not as breathtaking as Haneke's masterpiece *The Piano Player* – which precedes it – and perhaps even not as good as the brilliant *Caché* – which comes right after it – the movie is still very remarkable; less for its rather straightforward plot and more for its masterful play of images and the way it is filmed. It tells the story of a family: a woman named Anne, her husband, daughter and son, who comes to their house in the countryside. They find their house occupied by another, very shabby looking family again: a woman, a man and two kids, with the intruding man pointing his gun at them right from the start. After short negotiations, Anne's husband gets shot to death by the intruder and she is forced to leave together with her children. Apparently, some sort of an enigmatic disaster has happened; there is no electricity, nothing is working and people are desperately trying to survive.<sup>6</sup> Anne and her children (Eva and Benny) wander around the area for some time. Finally, they reach

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6) The causes and the actual nature of the disaster remain unknown throughout the film. One of the few suggestions can be perhaps found in a drawing shown twice in the movie: it depicts something that looks like a giant explosion and a few odd blurs dripping down from the sky. We learn also that animals have been dying because of the polluted water. At one point, Anne and her children

an abandoned railway station where a group of other survivors awaits a train that would possibly take them to a safer place. As the community grows chaos increases as well with inevitable outbursts of violence recurring ever more frequently. A quasi-religious legend, clearly based on the traditional Jewish tale of the 36 righteous ones that sustain the world, is circulated among the crowd.<sup>7</sup> According to this rather unconventional and somewhat Christianized version of the story, the righteous ones leap naked into the fire in order to set things right again by their sacrifice. In what seems to be a desperate attempt to assume this role and thus save his family, and other members of the community, in one of the last scenes of the movie Anne's son takes off his clothes and is about to throw himself into the fire burning on the tracks.<sup>8</sup>

The movie is filmed in long, calm shots; there is no music or any additional sound and the actors avoid more vivid facial expression. The vision is often obstructed by fog or, more frequently, by prolonged darkness. One scene of this sort demands particular attention. Still before the family had arrived at the railway station, they spend the night in a barn. In the middle of the night Benny disappears. Anne decides to go and look for him. Before she leaves, she instructs Eva to keep the fire in front of the barn: the darkness is so perfect that if the fire goes out they will never find each other again. Soon, Anne finds herself wrapped by the darkness. The light coming from the distant fire watched by Eva and from the burning bundle of straw Anne holds in her hand is unable to overcome the darkness and unveil anything in the surroundings. Haneke sees to it that the dark is almost complete so that the spectator, too, cannot see much. The scene is long enough for us to discover together with Anne that we have never been in a real dark yet. It is also long enough for our astonishment to give way to growing anxiety; with the dense burden of the empty dark duration of the scene lying heavily on us. It would seem that showing the surrounding darkness from Anne's subjective point of view would have enhanced the anxiety of the spectator. Haneke, though, avoids this move as he seems to know that such a gesture would only apparently result in *Einfühlung*: in feeling together with the woman but in fact it would have been founded on an ideological self-deception – safe in our comfortable armchairs we would have fantasized about feeling the thrill of being left in the dark. Paradoxically but logically, in order to be with the woman we have to watch her from outside, from a distance – and see that we can hardly see anything. Perhaps we would like to be with her and in her, in order to reduce the unease and find relief in the *pathos* of the illusory empathy. The darkness and vagueness of the obstructed vision subverts the safety of our own position as spectators and so, without the illusions of *Einfühlung*, the agoraphobic helplessness of the woman standing alone on the empty, dark field is captured in an image.

As far as our present purposes are concerned, however, the most important sequence of the movie is its very last shot which, to my mind, belongs to the most brilliant endings in world cinema as such. Benny's intended sacrifice – his above-mentioned attempt to assume the role of one of the 36 righteous ones – is prevented

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have to pass by a pile of burning corpses of cows. Soon they watch the pile from inside of a shed. By showing this image Haneke may be alluding to the famous photograph taken in Auschwitz by a member of Sonderkommando, possibly from inside of a gas chamber, showing the burning of human corpses. See Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images In Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, trans. Shane B. Lillis (Chicago: The Chicago University Press, 2008). Obviously, this allusion – if it is one – is open to various readings. However this may be, another afterimage of the Shoah may be present in a photograph hanging in the vicinity of the aforementioned drawing of the explosion: it shows a group of marching refugees or prisoners, an image which may refer to the present events, but (being black-and-white) may be a snap-shot from an earlier catastrophe, possibly from the Shoah itself.

7) Scholem, *The Tradition of the Thirty-Six Hidden Just Men*, 251–256.

8) Interestingly, Haneke chose to name Anne's son after the main protagonist of his earlier movie, *Benny's Video*, a boy who looks at reality only through his camera, murders his girlfriend and then turns in his parents who tried to cover his own crime. In what at least seems to be a relatively hopeful reversal, Haneke has his new Benny try to save his mother and sister, but the result of the attempt remains unclear.

by a man who keeps watch outside of the station. The man embraces the boy and tries to calm him down. He persuasively argues that Benny's resolution to leap into the fire is equivalent to the action itself and hence the salvation, perhaps even the resurrection of the dead, is to be expected. However, we shall never learn to what extent this semi-action of the desperate boy has been really effective. In the very next scene, the very last scene of the film, the perspective just radically shifts and so we watch a countryside landscape through the window of a train – the sound of which we can also hear. The shot is very long, the train keeps on moving, the view changes, but nothing substantial really happens.

After a while we catch ourselves doing and wanting several things at the same time. First of all, we would desperately like the camera to turn around and show the inside of the train. Perhaps then we might get a chance to learn what we will never know: Is the family on the train? Have they been rescued or is the train still coming to get them? Are we on the right track? Where and when is all this happening? This time, then, we are offered the subjective camera view we have been denied in the scene in the dark discussed above but, this time it is a rather unwanted gift as now we find ourselves literally trapped within the perspective of an undefined subjectivity (who is watching all that?!). Even more interestingly, we catch our eye searching through the landscape. What is our eye looking for? Well, several contradictory things we might see would satisfy us. The station where the family was waiting, an image which would enable us to put together the disconnected plot and would give us a sense of an ending or some picturesque effects of the disaster, natural or not. Or some equally picturesque visual evidence that after the disaster natural vegetation has gone mad. Or some traces of human activity: destroyed or, on the contrary, in perfect shape. As for the latter possibility, at the very beginning of the sequence we do catch a quick glimpse of something that looks like a shipping container and then, twice, we see a rather peaceful country road crossing the tracks, with some usual installations standing next to the crossing. However, these images are maddeningly inconclusive as far as the nature of the disaster and the state of human civilization are concerned. What we are left with is the green but greyish, not unpleasant but not very beautiful, untamed but not very wild, rather tedious landscape of the countryside. As our desperation grows and our eye keeps on searching – and as we watch ourselves watching – the sequence and the movie with it simply comes to an abrupt end: surely with no bang, but with no whimper, either.

This is, then, what images can do, after all, when trying to show the future. Haneke wisely avoids the traps of the sadistic voyeurism and of the premature discharge of anxiety. He accomplishes that by constructing a sequence of reflective images which are not only to be watched but which force us to watch ourselves watching them. The ever wandering, ever searching, maddeningly unsatisfied eye of the spectator entrapped within the perspective of an enigmatic subjectivity is part and parcel of this reflective sequence. Haneke does not show the future nor does he talk about it. By showing this awkwardly neutral landscape watched by an unknown spectator at the end of his movie, he makes us see our own eye desperately looking for the images to come.

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