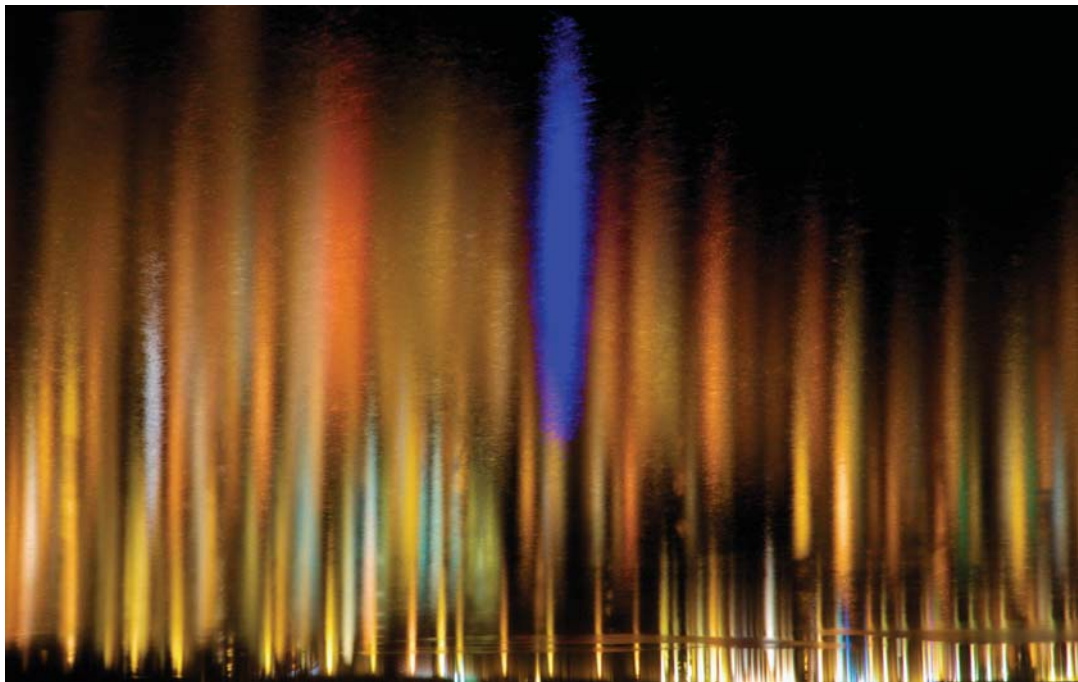


'We Photograph Things To Drive Them Out of Our Minds': War, Vision, and the Decoding of Memory in the Photography of Iraq Veteran Russell Chapman

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I am opening this article with two images without giving any details or captions. I would like you to scroll back up and take a good look at them on your screen, pause for a moment and record your stream of consciousness. This is not an exercise in visual analysis or rational examination but a moment to let yourself go in front of each image and write down the flow of words that surfaces in your mind within a minute's time – as disjointed, disassociated, or unpunctuated as this flow may be.

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The two images were taken in downtown Lugano in 2012 by the UK artist and former British soldier Russell Chapman. They are at the heart of this essay, which discusses processes of visual assimilation of traumatic encounters in photography, attempting to show the dynamics between visual intake and recollection when it comes to war. Perception during combat often is characterized by a temporal and spatial hypervision, where a soldier can spot minute details from a far distance. These details receive priority in the mental encoding of the experience and later surface in the form of disconnected flashes, which can occur in random and unexpected circumstances. Digital recording and manipulation technologies in both photography and film play a key role in the understanding of how vision functions during war and why the memory of it is so isolated. This essay departs from the sparks of memory that surfaced during processes of digital manipulation in the photography of Russell Chapman and then proceeds to consider them within the nature of combat vision. Vital examples from Kathryn Bigelow's academy-award winning film *The Hurt Locker* and stories from Phil Klay's acclaimed book *Redeployment* give further insight into the lived experience in Iraq, illustrating how war is recorded in sharp and disconnected fragments. Finally, the study draws on relevant research in neuropsychology that demonstrates the alteration of both consciousness and vision when exposed to stress. The fact that emotional arousal prioritizes object- and detail-focused vision at the expense of narrative and contextualization explains why the seeing, assimilating, and recalling of war happens in form of a visually acute, but disjointed piecemeal experience.

Russell Chapman is a Scottish-born photographer who served in the UK military in Bosnia, Africa, Afghanistan, and in Iraq. In 2013 he also embarked on a two-month documentary photography project to Syria and the refugee camps in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey to record what was then still called a revolution. He has always been a photographer; he started to experiment with the camera at an early age and continued to explore the potentials of photography before and during his service in the military. He still works as a photographer.¹ Chapman took both pictures shown at the outset of this article in the summer of 2012, years after his service in the military had ended. Figure 1 is an image of Swiss architect Mario Botta's well-known building of the Banca del Gottardo in Lugano and Figure 2 is an abstracted detail of a high-dynamic-range (HDR) photograph that shows reflections in the water of Lake Lugano at night. Both seem 'benign:' one is a black-and-white representation of a piece of architecture and the other one an experimentation in form, color, and light. Originally, they were certainly intended as such; however, in the processes of digital manipulation of the original JPEGs that led to the abstraction of both representations, memories from the combat zone started to resurface in Chapman's mind.



Figure 1
Russell Chapman, Untitled (Lugano 2012)
Image courtesy of Russell Chapman



Figure 2
Russell Chapman, Untitled (Lugano 2012)
Image courtesy of Russell Chapman²

Returning to the stream of consciousness recording, I conducted the same exercise with a group of students in my “Visual Semiotics” course, using the two pictures. Just like you, the students had no idea about the artist, his story or when, where, how, and why these pictures were taken. When observing Banca del Gottardo (figure 1), the students wrote: “sky, empty, cold, dead, plateau, solitary, clones, concentration camp, Big Brother, deserted, unity, dismal, silence.” For the reflections (figure 2), they put down: “fireworks, light, storm, bombs, blind, disoriented, rocket, fire, warm, falling, pain, candles, singular, blur, memory, intense, passion, fighting, up, force.” Some of these terms, such as “fireworks, candles, and passion” for the reflections and “sky, cold, and solitary” for the Banca del Gottardo are to be expected; but “concentration camp” and “bomb” were startling at first.

Chapman took the shot of Banca del Gottardo (figure 1) in the early spring during the morning hours, a moment when downtown Lugano is still empty and quiet. The photograph could qualify as a portrait of modern architecture in the Southern Swiss context, however, there is an eerie quality that the viewer unconsciously picks up. The sensation is driven by the picture’s absence of life and the stark black-and-white contrast. There are no people, no cars, not even the trees have leaves. The monochrome rendition of the image enhances the feeling by forcing the play between sun and shadow and leaving little room for tonal gradations. For the spectator, there is nothing inviting or mind-easing about this photograph; it functions under the principle of exclusion, that is to not figure the precise content or references that are at the heart of conception of the work, which often is present in photography that is informed by traumatic events.³ These visual dynamics explain the students’ associations of “empty, cold, dead, solitary, concentration camp.”

Chapman’s second image of the reflections of light in the water of Lake Lugano at night was taken a few months after the Banca del Gottardo. Again, our reaction goes beyond registering it as a visual experiment. Whereas the black-and-white photograph is quietly uncanny and gives us a creepy feeling, the color reflections come as an assault to the viewer – they present a threat: “storm, bombs, blind, disoriented, rocket, fire, force.” This reaction is in part provoked by a type of artificially achieved realism that the human mind is not accustomed to when looking at a photograph. As the human eye’s light sensitivity from dark to bright is about ten times superior to what a camera can capture, we are used to seeing photographs with a lower dynamic range than the way we perceive nature. Chapman’s photograph is a high-dynamic-range (HDR) photograph, which means that he put his camera on a tripod and took three identically framed shots of the same scene with three different shutter speeds. He thus obtained a bright, a medium, and a dark photo, and, in a software process on his computer, combined the three shots into a

single HDR picture. He then cropped the image, and, in a final stage, rotated it 180 degrees to turn it upside down.⁴

In both images the unsettling feeling that the viewer experiences does not come from their actual subject matter but is provoked by the outcome of the images' digital abstractions. What is most noteworthy is that the same is true for the photographer's perception. In conversations, Chapman revealed to me that in the shot of Banca del Gottardo, the memory from the war zone did not surface while framing or taking the picture. Only when he downloaded the JPEG and started to manipulate it digitally, turning it into a black-and-white picture and enhancing the contrast, flashes of abandoned and desolate locations in Afghanistan, where potential danger lurked behind each corner, came back. In the color photograph, the revelation is even more fascinating. Again, memory was not sparked in the process of taking the photographs; neither in the digital overlaying of the three individual shots or the cropping; this time it was in the final step, during the 180-degree rotation and thus concluding abstraction that images from the war resurfaced from the unconscious. The final image reminded him of "blood [seen] in searchlights" at night.

Long before the advent of Photoshop and digital manipulation, Walter Benjamin was aware of the potential of photography to unravel memory stored in the human optical unconscious. In his *Short History of Photography* of 1931, he comments on the potential of photography to unearth visual memory, triggered by a "spark" that initiates the unbinding of that memory:

In such a picture, that spark has, as it were, burned through the person in the image with reality, finding the indiscernible place in the condition of that long past minute, where the future is nesting, even today, so eloquently that we, looking back, can discover it. It is a different nature which speaks to the camera than [the one that] speaks to the eye: so different that in place of a space consciously woven together by a man on the spot there enters a space held together unconsciously [...] Photography makes such knowledge possible.⁵

I propose that the unbinding of the data that is unconsciously held together does not take place completely arbitrarily. Rather, in an unconscious, yet pressing desire to restore memory, the photographer targets a scene to put the process of unfolding into motion. Roland Barthes, in his final book *Camera Lucida*, cites a conversation on the matter between Gustav Janouch and Franz Kafka. Janouch claims that "[t]he necessary condition for an image is sight," to which Kafka smilingly replies: "We photograph things in order to drive them out of our minds. My stories are a way of shutting my eyes."⁶ Barthes brings the exchange into his discussion to stress silence as the necessary condition for a photograph to speak. He rejects "blustering photographs," such as the documentary photography of the seven years of civil war in Nicaragua that he takes up in some of the previous chapters.⁷ He writes:

"Shutting your eyes is to make the image speak in silence. When things are spelled out clearly in detail, they lose the capacity to touch; when they are abstracted or taken out of context, they upset. The incapacity to name is a good symptom and indication of this disturbance: the effect is certain but unlocatable [...] it is acute yet muffled, it cries out in silence. Odd contradiction: a floating flash."⁸

I would be most curious to find out what you wrote in your stream of consciousness at the outset of reading this essay and if it has affinity to a "floating flash" that concerns memory of war. The flash provokes irritation without spelling out precisely what it is and where that disturbance comes from. It is present in a dormant state in the artist's mental space to be recorded and unbound through the camera lens; this may happen on purpose, it may also be an unconscious act. It may not receive a single figuration in the image but may result from a combination of interconnected elements.⁹

Chapman's photographs do not contain precise elements of the canonical iconography of 21st century warfare in the Middle East. There are no dusty checkpoints, inscrutable Arabs, humvees, hooded prisoners, or queasy torture scenes.¹⁰ Their visual abstractions disturb the

viewer without being able to immediately pinpoint where that unsettling feeling comes from. The associations of “concentration camp” and “bombs, blind, disoriented” in the stream of the students’ consciousness thus are not far-fetched. They are examples of Benjamin’s “spark” and Barthes’ “floating flash,” the un-referential sign that creates a disquieting feeling without spelling out exact details. As an artist and soldier, Chapman is very aware of both the process of ‘driving out his memory’ and the power of abstraction in his photography. In another conversation, he related to me: “They come and go, my memories are not like a continuous film that runs on in my head but more like sparks in which I recognize forms that touch all of my senses. Photography does not mean to freeze what you just saw but more what you just felt when we venture into our past.”¹¹

When Chapman returned from his documentary mission in Syria in the spring of 2013, I was interested in the things he drove out of his mind and in what happened to the floating flashes of his optical unconscious while seeing and recording war through the viewfinder of a lens. For me, the most compelling picture that came out of Syria is a black-and-white image, which Chapman subsequently titled *Silent Memorial* (figure 3); it is the only picture that received an immediate title in his Syria collection. He took the shot as he was diving out of a sniper alley and there is something incredibly powerful about the image: a pair of shoes, in the middle of a road, with nothing else around them. There are no people, no identifiable objects, not a single indication of (former) life other than a pair of abandoned boots. In its focus and lack of context, you can feel the history of the scene and you can sense the imminent danger of the situation – this is not just a pair of shoes that somebody dispensed of because they were no longer needed. The compelling absence, which results from the position of the shoes in conjunction with the desolate context, and the subsequent monochrome rendition, unsettles the viewer, similarly to the photograph of the Banca del Gottardo (figure 1). I asked Chapman about the story of the picture and why he recorded the scene: “It reminded me of my own experience, you know that somebody’s been killed, that’s why it stopped me.”



Figure 3
Russell Chapman, *Silent Memorial* (Aleppo 2013)
Image courtesy of Russell Chapman

‘Recording a scene’ in this case has a twofold implication: it is both the act of documenting a present moment with a technical device and the recalling of a past event or

emotion. For Chapman, it was a flash of combat memory that prompted him to stop in the middle of a sniper alley and to take a shot of the abandoned boots. A simple civilian would not have had the courage to pause in the middle of a sniper alley but there is more to *Silent Memorial* than pure bravery. The power that marks the image comes from the partial integration of a past flash into a present moment – it is a matter of assimilation. From the point of view of psychology, assimilation refers to one of the two ways to integrate schema-discrepant information;¹² in the context of photography with traumatic events at its roots, assimilation is similarly understood as an incomplete incorporation of a past moment into a present picture.

In his seminal essay on trauma and photography, Eric Rosenberg makes a claim that photography escapes the truth claim and can only be about assimilation: “If photography is about anything, it must be assimilation, and its failure [...] We photograph to assimilate; we are photographed to assimilate; others photograph or are photographed or photograph the other in order to assimilate.”¹³ Photography is not ‘of’ something, it does not reproduce the world; it simply is a version of reality that no longer exists. Rosenberg claims that painting is painting; architecture is architecture; and film becomes a story. But photography, despite its apparent indexicality or truth claim, is not only what it presents. It is not a visual duplication of a real-time scene.¹⁴ In its capacity to bind multiple dimensions that remain hidden to the eye while the shot is taken, photography offers the integration of trauma as a possibility. To the traumatized this means that the traumatic event always stands as a bound object outside of one’s state of world, and thus always is yet to be assimilated. One can also turn this around and claim that the world exists as an external object to a traumatized self. Either way, the partial integration of fragmented pieces is never complete and the spaces between stored-away memory, consciousness, and representation are never fully assembled into a semantic whole – both trauma and picture perpetually escape narrative closure.

Going back to *Silent Memorial* (figure 3), I would like to elaborate on memory as a flash and its assimilation. In addition to the power of the image and the courage of the artist, it is the precision of Chapman’s vision that is rather striking: “The boots were in good condition, still very serviceable, great boots, caterpillars, actually my size - but in a sniper alley and thus difficult to get to them,” he comments. This type of focus on the object and the gauging with respect to the boots’ size, condition, and type while being in life-threatening danger is a typical instance of a soldier’s hypervision as experienced during combat. Already in earlier conversations, the acuity of Chapman’s recollections surprised me. In the abstract photograph of the reflections (figure 2) it was “blood in searchlights at night;” in the black-and-white image of the Banca del Gottardo (figure 1) the recollection was “enemy behind the corner.”

The brevity of Chapman’s remarks – they literally are flashes – is remarkable. At first, I thought that I was not asking enough or the right questions in order to get a fuller story. But even in longer conversations there were no complete narratives or syntheses. From the literature on trauma and photography, we know that this is the nature of assimilation “and its failure” when it comes to trauma.¹⁵ We know that traumatic memory and one’s world are never fully linked, that memory manifests itself in the most unexpected moments, and that its figurations do not necessarily correspond to “the hit,” the scenario of the original disturbance.¹⁶ But this does not fully explain the precision of these flashes in both image and statement. Could this accuracy be linked to an actual mode of perception when it comes to seeing war from the inside?

Two brilliant examples may give further clarification of how a soldier visually records combat situations. Both Kathryn Bigelow’s academy award winning film *The Hurt Locker* (2008) and Phil Klay’s book *Redeployment* (2014) indicate a type of hypervision that is prompted by an alteration of consciousness under imminent threat. Both show a fragmentary experience of the visual world, in which the brain is completely absorbed by an individual scenario to then immediately make room for the next one. In these examples, combat is not experienced as a continuous film but more like a band of unlinked treads.

Despite its superhero aspirations and misrepresentations of the war in Iraq, *The Hurt Locker* offers an original attempt to portray what happens within a soldier's brain during combat.¹⁷ It was written by Marc Boal, directed by Kathryn Bigelow, and shot in Jordan, a few miles from the Iraqi border. It captures the conditions of war in the Middle East, such as the sweltering heat, and the constant unknown whether you are facing friend or foe. It is told from the point of view of a three-man team of U.S. soldiers whose job is to find and dispose of IEDs (improvised explosive devices) in the streets of Baghdad during the blistering summer of 2004. Sergeant First Class William James, played by Jeremy Renner, is the soldier responsible for defusing the bombs, which come in the form of explosives planted in and above ground, and on and within human bodies. The film effectively takes the viewer into the combat zone, showing what it means to be exposed to constant and extreme danger.

The film received significant praise for its technology. Bigelow used extraordinary equipment to shoot the film: multiple Aaton S16mm cameras to capture multiple perspectives in documentary style, and a high-speed Phantom HD camera that can shoot 10,000 frames/second.¹⁸ The latter was designed specifically to record the explosion scenes in order to convey to the audience the sense of both the blast and the over pressure, which is the expanding air that emanates from an explosion, considered as dangerous as the actual bomb. This machine makes the film not just another war movie. It records the explosions (they are real explosions, not digital simulations) in minute details; they are then given to the audience in super-slow motion, re-configuring time and spatiality in the depiction of warfare and violence. Some critics called this temporal slicing a "distancing effect," a gratuitous spectacle of grace and beauty on the stage of war that allows the director to stretch a little bit of nothing into a 131 minute movie.¹⁹ I would propose that Bigelow actually captured the human side, the existential truth of seeing war from the inside.²⁰

The much-quoted opening scene jumps right into the streets of Baghdad, where Sergeants Thompson, Sandborn, and Eldridge are attempting to disassemble a bomb.²¹ Thompson, played by Guy Pearce, is wearing the protective bomb suit and advances towards the explosive; he picks up the device, puts it back down, and walks away. Sandborn and Eldridge stay back to keep an eye on the situation. Movement in a butcher shop about 25 meters away ticks Eldridge off; he picks up his Carbine, and, through the viewfinder, sees the butcher holding a cell phone in his hands. He alerts Sandborn and shouts at the butcher to put down the phone. The butcher signals that he just wants to make a call but Eldridge does not trust the friendly gesture and the film picks up speed. Eldridge frantically keeps on shouting at the butcher to drop the cell, Sandborn yells to clear the area, and Thompson starts to run. Both Eldridge and Sandborn then take to the butcher but he escapes their sight lines. They cannot take the shot; the butcher dials a number and sets off the bomb.

As soon as the bomb is ignited, the film switches to super slow motion. Thompson is shown in front of the explosion set off by the device, running to escape the detonation. Smoke is rising from the explosion but what is more startling is the cinematography of the effect of the over pressure. You see minute pebbles of gravel rising from the road and tiny particles of car rust detaching from an abandoned vehicle. The scenes then go back and forth between the fine gravel and rust shooting up and Thompson moving. The few seconds seem to last forever and the sequence ends – still in super slow motion – with Thompson falling lifelessly to the ground. He died in the explosion and in the film is subsequently replaced by James (Jeremy Renner).²² The super slow motion allows the viewer to see the explosion in almost microscopic vision. The effect is repeated in a different scene, when Sandborn is placed as a sniper to eliminate a suspicious target from a far distance. Once he has taken the shot, we see the cartridge case ever so slowly tumble to the ground, sparking off bits of dust, to bounce back and gradually rotate up in the air.²³ This temporal slicing makes you hold your breath, adding suspension to the film's already tense content. Bigelow effectively underscored the temporal fragmentation with the film's music, where every touchdown of the cartridge case is marked by an individual (heart) beat.

In his acclaimed book *Redeployment*, Phil Klay, an ex-marine who served in Iraq, verbally relates the same type of overdrive recording of visual data and slow, piecemeal experience of life, which Bigelow so brilliantly captured through the Phantom camera.²⁴ Klay's stories are precise strikes to the heart, mapping the conflict in the Middle East from the point of view of emotional casualty: "Klay succeeds brilliantly, capturing on an intimate scale the ways in which the war in Iraq evoked a unique array of emotion, predicament and heartbreak. In Klay's hands, Iraq comes across not merely as a theater of war but as a laboratory for the human condition in extremis."²⁵ The first chapter is told by a soldier who just returned home from a tour. Prompted by a feeling of disconnection to the American world of shopping, his memory returns to Iraq. Thinking of both, he differentiates between three modes of color-coded existence, white, orange and red, which illustrate the mental constitution of soldiers in the combat zone: *white* is the state of "normal" human beings who just go about their daily life and casually take in the world; *orange* is a state of constant alert, marked by an overdrive recording of visual details; and *red* symbolizes collapse. He describes his own eagle-eye-sight as an outcome of the orange mode (ironically while shopping at American Eagle Outfitters):

Outside there are people walking around by the windows like it's no big deal. People who have no idea where Fallujah is, where three members of your platoon died. People who've spent their whole lives at white.

They'll never even get close to orange. You can't, until the first time you're in a firefight, or the first time an IED goes off that you missed, and you realize that everybody's life, everybody's, depends on you not fucking up. And you depend on them.

Some guys go straight to red. They stay like that for a while and then they crash, go down past white, down to whatever is lower than "I don't fucking care if I die." Most everybody else stays orange, all the time.

Here's what orange is. You don't see or hear like you used to. Your brain chemistry changes. You take in every piece of the environment, everything. I could spot a dime in the street twenty yards away. I had antennae out that stretched down the block. It's hard to even remember exactly what that felt like. I think you take in too much information to store so you just forget, free up brain space to take in everything about the next moment that might keep you alive. And then you forget that moment, too, and focus on the next. And the next. And the next. For seven months. [...] It'll be a long fucking time before you get down to white.²⁶

"Your brain chemistry changes" is an intuitive observation with respect to the alteration of consciousness and perception when exposed to danger. It is fair to assume that sustained exposure to known and unknown peril alters a soldier's cognition, which may be related to the way war is taken in visually. Studies in neurophysiology and neuropsychology have investigated the impact of emotion on perceptual processes and found that arousal and stress definitely have an impact on visual perception.²⁷ A study by Mara Mather and Matthew R. Sutherland suggests that emotional arousal affects representation of whatever has the highest priority and impairs representations of stimuli that are of lower importance.²⁸ When it comes to the encoding and memory of prioritized stimuli, emotion can enhance memory for details of the most prominent item in a scene; in other words, what receives priority during perception, may later be remembered in greater detail. When arousal is due to negative prompts, detail memory is again enhanced at the expense of telling a complete story, as negative emotion enhances perception but inhibits narrative processing.

In the movie, Eldridge spotted the small cell phone in the butcher's hands from 25 meters away; the Iraq soldier in Klay's book relates that he could spot "a dime in the street twenty yards away;" and, in Syria, Chapman recognized the size and type of the boots while diving out of a sniper alley. This optic precision may be explained by Mather and Sutherland's research, which proposes that arousal (whether elicited by external stimuli, internal thoughts, or stress hormones) modulates the strength of competing mental representations. Mather and Sutherland call it "arousal-biased competition in perception and memory" (ABC) and their theory possibly

explains the hypervision and precise memory flashes as portrayed in these examples and further examples related by combat veterans from Iraq. ABC suggests that the combination of “top-down” factors, such as goals-specific, visual searching, as well as knowledge and expectations drive perception. Applied to warfare, it makes sense to assume that a soldier in the field is trained to prioritize his or her visual world, that is to look for suspicious cues, such as cell phones, wires, or any other elements that could make up and spark off an IED. When the kind of “top-down” looking as proposed by the ABC theory takes place under conditions of stress, the visual intake of goal-relevant information receives an even higher priority. Emotion (stress) is the key factor, as emotionally arousing stimuli themselves have high priority, even when they are not goal-relevant.²⁹

This priority focusing may account for the eagle-eye-sight as reported by soldiers and brilliantly portrayed in Bigelow’s super-slow-motion explosions. But how are the precise, fragmented memory flashes to be explained when it comes to remembering the combat zone? Mather and Sutherland’s ABC theory posits that arousal makes it more difficult to keep track of multiple items. “Having multiple high priority representations competing with each other can lead to overall suppression [...]. ABC theory predicts that arousal increases such mutual inhibitory effects. To maintain multiple representations in working memory, one must continuously cycle through them to ensure that each one remains active.”³⁰ Seeing the world in piecemeal components is driven by the necessity to “cycle” through individual representations when under stress, as vision prioritizes the focus on single objects/items. This “cycling” is what the soldier in Klay’s book so vividly described: “I think you take in too much information to store so you just forget, free up brain space to take in everything about the next moment that might keep you alive. And then you forget that moment, too, and focus on the next. And the next. And the next.” In Bigelow’s film, the mental rotation is reproduced in the opening scene, which effectively switches back and forth between images showing pebbles rising from the ground and particles of rust detaching from the car.

The prioritizing of objects in focus and the mental cycling or targeted vision may also account for Chapman’s statement that “my memories are not like a continuous film that runs on in my head but more like sparks.” But there is more to it. Emotional arousal enhances the representation of whatever has the highest priority, and, when there is competing information, representations need to successively be replaced in a continuous sequence. Within a prioritized representation, however, there is further concentration. This is called the “weapon focus effect” and describes that the presence of a weapon reduces eyewitness identification of the perpetrator.³¹ When under threat, memory for the central detail is increased at the cost of peripheral detail. Emotionally provocative items, as faced in high-risk situations, have high priority and amplify this effect. Due to the competition of mental resources, they are also “bound” or encoded in memory with the same, high priority. If the subject receives an emotionally charged stimulus again after the encoding of the previous scene, the memory for the already stored scene is amplified at the expense of peripheral details: “[...] postencoding arousal enhances memory for emotional items but impairs or does not affect memory for neutral items.”³² When the arousal is caused by a negative emotion, there is yet another dimension to memory, which again drives its fragmentation. Positive stimuli promote narrative, as the encoding of positive items is associated with greater activation in brain regions associated with semantic or conceptual processing. Negative items, on the other hand, recruit brain regions involved in sensory processing. They slow down the semantic processing but not the perceptual processing.³³ In other words, perception under negative stress inhibits narrative memory but enhances visual take-in and the remembering of details.

I realize that Mather and Sutherland’s ABC theory cannot solely account for the fragmentation of memory in the wake of trauma. However, it gives the first-hand accounts from soldiers when it comes to the visual experience and recollection of war a scientific underpinning. The literature concerned with the modes of representation of traumatic content in photography

has been very much concerned with assimilation and its figures, that is the manifestations, forms, and abstractions of traumatic content. It is true that photography offers an added dimension to the understanding of such processes due to its capacity to record more than the eye can take in at the moment of capture. The image holds further, unarticulated dimensions or non-referential signs, which may be decoded in the viewing process by the photographer or simply “felt” by the external viewer of the picture. Digital manipulation technologies, such as employed by Chapman in the two pictures featured at the beginning of this essay, provide further means to access the “unconsciously bound space” of which Walter Benjamin was intuitively aware already in 1931. Putting art, philosophy, technology, and scientific psychology adjacent to each other, a ‘picture’ emerges that explains the “floating flash” as an outcome of perceptual processes and their encoding in memory.

Having gone through the cycle of explanation from photography to technology to scientific psychology, Chapman’s pictures can never be simple experimentations with digital manipulations – if that ever was possible in the first place is questionable to begin with. I was drawn to them, because of a tension resulting from representation and abstraction. Fragmentation and abstraction here do not speak of a metaphysical purification of form or a fascination with the flat surface. The images speak of what Briony Fer, based on the writings of Georges Bataille, saw as a manifestation of psychoanalytic notions, such as loss and trauma.³⁴ Once you know that the image recalls “blood in searchlights”, you can never go back to just see reflections in the water at night – maybe reflections in the water will never be seen as charming optical phenomena once your mind invested them with the knowledge of trauma memory, even if it is not your own. The abstract image is not political in the sense that seeing equals identifying.

The question remains where trauma exactly resides in the image. To the viewer, trauma resides in the transitional space between image and the knowledge of the facts, experiences, emotions, and associations that informed the conception of the image. Explanation and interpretation shape the content of representation. To the veteran artist, trauma exists in the recognition of the floating flash and the unbinding of the unconscious space – the place where perception is encoded, stored, but not (yet) given a name or reference. The stimulating aspect about research in trauma studies is that it is never finished or conclusive. Technological innovations in both art and science will make further contributions to the understanding of how vision functions, how it is bound when it comes to witnessing emotionally charged situations. But even if the flash is not deciphered and decoded, it is very much present – seen and felt.

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¹ <https://russellchapman.wordpress.com/>

² Russell Chapman’s photograph of the reflections has been influential for my own photography and inspired my pictures that became the masthead of *intervalla*’s website.

³ Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005).

⁴ I have been fascinated with the photograph from the moment I saw it, to the point that I tried to re-create the experience in my own photography. The masthead photograph of the “intervalla” website is inspired by Chapman’s reflections and an acknowledgement of his work.

⁵ Walter Benjamin, “A Short History of Photography,” *Screen* 13/1 (1972): 5-26.

⁶ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. R. Howard (London: Vintage Books, 2000), 53.

⁷ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, Chapter 9.

⁸ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 55.

⁹ By not articulating the irritation in a precise, figural representation, the encounter with the original disturbance, i.e. war, remains a “first” encounter for the viewer and thus carries the potential for a secondary “missed encounter.” See Baer, *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma*, Chapter 3: “Secondary Witnessing and the Holocaust,” especially the section “An Experience Remains a “First,” 90-93.

¹⁰ Regarding the iconography of warfare in the Middle East, see Robert Luckhurst, “In War Times: Fictionalizing Iraq,” *Contemporary Literature* 53/4 (Winter 2012), 717.

¹¹ For a scholarly source on the non-sequential surfacing of trauma-informed memory, see M.J. Larrabee, "The Time of Trauma: Husserl's Phenomenology and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder," *Human Studies* 18/4 (October 1995): 351-366.

¹² See Julia König's essay in this volume.

¹³ Eric Rosenberg, "Walker Evan's Depression and the Trauma of Photography," in *Trauma and Visuality in Modernity*, ed. L. Saltzman and E. Rosenberg (Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2006), 31.

¹⁴ Tom Gunning, "What's the Point of an Index? Or, Faking Photographs," *Nordicom Review* 5, no.1/2 (September 2004), 41.

¹⁵ "There is no reconciliation of opposites, contradictions, do not find rest in a superior synthesis. Rather they stick together in a growing tension, in a choice that is at once a choice of exclusion and a choice of contrariety." Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster* (Lincoln, 1995), 68, quoted in Rosenberg, "Walker Evan's Depression and the Trauma of Photography," 32.

¹⁶ Regarding the discussion of the "hit," the disaster that causes disruption and provokes the "missed encounter" with the actual event, see Gene Ray, *Terror and the Sublime in Art and Critical Theory: From Auschwitz to Hiroshima to September 11* (New York, 2005), Introduction: "The Hit."

¹⁷ On the misrepresentations, see James Naremore, "Films of the Year, 2009," *Film Quarterly* 63/4 (Summer 2010), 18-32.

¹⁸ Joshua Clover, "Allegory Bomb," *Film Quarterly* 63/2 (Winter 2009), 9.

¹⁹ Nick Dager, "Shooting Hurt Locker," Digital Cinema Report (2 December 2010).

<http://www.digitalcinemareport.com/article/shooting-hurt-locker#.VgLmdnsZBI8> (accessed December 23, 2014).

²⁰ See also Robert Sklar, Review "The Hurt Locker," *Cinéaste* 35/1 (Winter 2009), 55-56.

²¹ Renner, Jeremy, Ralph Fiennes, Kathryn Bigelow, Mark Boal, Nicolas Chartier, Greg Shapiro, Anthony Mackie, et al., *The Hurt Locker*. [Santa Monica, Calif.]: Distributed in Canada by Maple Pictures, 2010, at 0:07:30.

²² *The Hurt Locker*, at 0:09:05.

²³ *The Hurt Locker*, at 1:00:38.

²⁴ Phil Klay, *Redeployment* (New York: 2014). The book won the 2014 National Book Award for Fiction, and the National Book Critics Circle's 2014 John Leonard award given for a best first book in any genre. When Klay graduated from Dartmouth College he joined the US Marine Corps and served in Iraq's Anbar Province and from 2007-2008 as a Public Affairs Officer. After being discharged, he received an MFA from Hunter College.

²⁵ Dexter Filkins, "The Long Road Home," *The New York Times*, 9 March 2014 (Sunday Book Review), BR 1. (Dexter Filkins is a former Baghdad correspondent for *The Times*)

²⁶ Phil Klay, *Redeployment*, 12-13.

²⁷ Particularly interesting studies with respect to the impact of a threatening situation on perception are the following (listed chronologically): Elizabeth A. Phelps, Sam Ling, Marisa Carrasco, "Emotion Facilitates Perception and Potentiates the Perceptual Benefits of Attention," *Psychological Science* 17/4 (April, 2006): 292-299; Mara Mather, "Emotional Arousal and Memory Binding: An Object-based Framework," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 2/1 (March 2007), 33-52; Elizabeth A. Phelps and Tali Sharot, "How (And Why) Emotion Enhances the Subjective Sense of Recollection," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 17/2, The Interface between Neuroscience and Psychological Science (April, 2008): 147-152; Bruno R. Bocanegra and René Zeelenberg, "Emotion Improves and Impairs Early Vision," *Psychological Science* 20/6 (June 2009), 707-13; Bruno R. Bocanegra and René Zeelenberg, "Emotion-Induced Trade-Offs in Spatiotemporal Vision," *Journal of Experimental Psychology General* (March 2011), 272-282; Mara Mather and Matthew R. Sutherland, "Arousal-Biased Competition in Perception and Memory," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 6(2) (2011), 114-133.

²⁸ Mather and Sutherland, "Arousal-Biased Competition in Perception and Memory," 114-133.

²⁹ Mather and Sutherland, "Arousal-Biased Competition," 120.

³⁰ Mather and Sutherland, "Arousal-Biased Competition," 121.

³¹ Mather and Sutherland, "Arousal-Biased Competition," 122.

³² Mather and Sutherland, "Arousal-Biased Competition," 121.

³³ Mather and Sutherland, "Arousal-Biased Competition," 127. Mather and Sutherland's discussion of the ABC theory seems to be congruent with what the soldiers themselves report when returning from the combat zone. Another study by Bruno Bocanegra and René Zeelenberg, however, discusses experiments that showed that, in a threatening context, interchannel interactions between magnocellular and parvocellular channels alter perceptual phenomena. Parvocellular channels have smaller receptive fields selective for fine-grained HSF (high spatial frequency) stimuli at high luminance contrast, whereas magnocellular channels have larger receptive fields selective for coarse LSF (low spatial frequency) stimuli at low contrast. Apart from their differences in spatial receptive fields, magno- and parvocellular channels can also be differentiated in terms of their temporal response properties. Parvo cells exhibit slower and sustained responses compared with magno cells, which show fast and transient responses. Essentially, under threat perception is faster, as emotion facilitates fast temporal features that are more relevant for survival, but perception is also coarser, as speed happens at the expense of detail. Mather and Sutherland, "Arousal-Biased Competition," 128, n.1, address the research and conclude that more work is needed to clarify the issue. See

Bruno R. Bocanegra and René Zeelenberg, “Emotion Improves and Impairs Early Vision,” *Psychological Science* 20/6 (June 2009), 707-13; Bruno R. Bocanegra and René Zeelenberg, “Emotion-Induced Trade-Offs in Spatiotemporal Vision,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology General* (March 2011), 272-282.

³⁴ Briony Fer, *On Abstract Art* (Yale, 2000).