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The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence

The girl in the photograph wears her black hair tucked behind her ears. Her part is slightly crooked, and there is a small mole low on her throat, right above the top button of her blouse. She might be anywhere between five and ten years old. She's been posed against a wall or a screen. Stripped of its context, this is a lovely but unremarkable portrait of a small, serious looking girl, an image that's easy to look at and easy to forget.

But let's restore the context and look again. Pol Pot liked to have his prisoners photographed. Like the fourteen thousand or so others imprisoned at Tuol Sleng, the Khmer Rouge's "torture center," this girl slept shackled to the floor or wall, was likely tortured, photographed, and eventually shot—or bludgeoned to death, if the price of ammunition was high that year.

Is there a "right" way to respond—intellectually, emotionally, aesthetically—to such an image? Do we honor her by looking at her photograph or by refusing

to? If we look, can we learn anything about how she lived and why she died? What if we can't help but notice her beauty—or worse, the inadvertent beauty of the snapshot itself? What does that say about us—or photography? Are these considerations offensive: Do we have a right to make sophistries out of real suffering?

Susie Linfield has written a brave and unsettling book about these questions, and she creates a calculus for a new kind of photography criticism—one that respects photography rather than distrusts it, derives its power from intellect *and* feeling.

Standing in her way, however, is a tradition of photography critics who have found inherent problems with the medium. Photography has been accused of, briefly, celebrating the status quo and serving as capitalism's lackey (Bertolt Brecht); creating an "aesthetized" society (Walter Benjamin); appealing to our emotions not our intellect and thus eliciting base reactions (Siegfried Kracauer); manipulating us to produce a desired response (Roland Barthes); inuring us to suffering and deadening the conscience (Susan Sontag); promoting paralysis instead of outrage and action (John Berger); presenting scenes sans context and chronology

(Brecht, Sontag) and thus, breeding distortions
(Philip Gourevitch, Errol Morris, all of the above).

Into this fray marches Linfield at full tilt, seeking for photography critics “the same freedom of response” enjoyed by critics of film, dance, theater, and music. She defangs the denunciations, neatly explaining that the Frankfurt School’s distrust of photography came out of their particular context: Grossly distorted propaganda photos were used to stoke political hysteria in the already hysterical Weimer Germany—hence Brecht, Benjamin, and Kracauer developed a healthy skepticism. But above all, the book addresses Susan Sontag, for it was Sontag’s *On Photography*, Linfield writes, that was “responsible for establishing a tone of suspicion and distrust in photography criticism, and for teaching us that to be smart about photographs means to disparage them.”

Where *On Photography* is blunt, bold, and epigrammatic (recall those lines that land like jabs: “The act of taking pictures is a semblance of appropriation, a semblance of rape”), *The Cruel Radiance* is on a larger and messier mission. Linfield, who possesses none of Sontag’s theatricality on the page, is earnest and her engagement with the photographs is raw, her belief in photography’s power is absolute. She argues that photographs, more

than any other kind of journalism, bring us close to suffering and allow us to feel it quickly and keenly. They make atrocities specific. It's not enough for us to know that out of the Cambodian genocide, fourteen thousand people were exterminated at one of the Khmer Rouge's countless camps—it's the girl with the crooked part in her hair, whose singularity we noticed, whom we will remember, whom we might choose to mourn.

Taking the film critic Pauline Kael as a model of the kind of critical sensibility photography demands, Linfield allows her enthusiasms and prejudices to suffuse the book. The effect can be intimate and instructive—her readings of the images themselves are small miracles of sensitivity and austere beauty—but it can be equally embarrassing, especially when Linfield stoops to ethnocentrism: “The burqa is a grotesque, indeed totalitarian garment.” Capa's photos of demonstrations “are a pleasure to look at, for the marchers carry portraits of Zola, Voltaire, Diderot, and Gorky rather than of brooding old ayatollahs or teenaged suicides.”

She takes the reader through four historical moments—the Holocaust, the Cultural Revolution, the civil war in Sierra Leone, and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq—revealing how these different

conflicts produced different styles of depiction (Abu Ghraib, for example, seems to have summoned a new era where violence is performed for the camera). She introduces us to three masters—Robert Capa, chronicler of the Spanish Civil War, and contemporary photojournalists James Nachtwey and Gilles Peress—to examine how photographic technique can transmit political philosophy.

Witness the humanist Capa, whose narrative-rich photos feature hardships, certainly, but side by side with nobility, endurance, and dignity. Linfield writes, “Capa gave us pictures of a broken world but he never suggested that destruction is our natural state.” Compare him with Nachtwey, the lugubrious, latter-day Goya, in whose painfully explicit pictures, victims of famine, AIDS, or the machete are so brutalized that they’re barely recognizably human. His photographs don’t invite compassion, solidarity, or recognition: “In showing us the many ways that the human body can be destroyed, Nachtwey can inspire revulsion more easily than empathy.” His images are meant to shock, but at the same time, their formal compositions and classical allusions make them stately lamentations.

Despite its canny organization, the book wants greater internal clarity and consistency. Linfield

defends graphic images (such as Nachtwey's), writing, "Why is the teller, rather than the tale, considered obscene—and in any case, aren't some of the world's obscenities worthy of our attention?" But in another part of the book, she lambastes the "Arab press" for showing pictures of people maimed and murdered at the hands of terrorists or American and Israeli soldiers. She turns priggish and excoriates Al-Jazeera for televising "wanton loops of violence." Describing the images of dying children printed in the Palestinian newspaper *Al-Ayyam*, she is almost cruel: "These images seem to hail rather than protest the agony of victimization: It's hard to imagine that they deepened anyone's thinking."

Why are these depictions of deaths, as Linfield describes them, "lurid" not "tragic"? How can a newspaper photo "hail" the death of children? Why aren't these the "right" kinds of photographs, the way, say, Peress's portraits are? If the distinctions are apparent to Linfield, she doesn't make them sufficiently clear to the reader, who might be left supposing the author believes that some photographs—or victims—seem more deserving of our attention or compassion than others, an unfortunate prospect for such a bighearted book.

Still, Linfield's quest is heroic, and if she stumbles, it's in the pursuit of a powerful—and personal—vision of photography's necessity and potential. Like Robert Capa, she wants to connect the viewer to causes “out of respect, solidarity, and self-interest rather than pity or guilt.” Like Gilles Peress, she proceeds with a lack of sentimentality and a sensualist's pleasure in the surprising detail. And like James Nachtwey, she accepts that there is no logic that can explain, no redemption that awaits so much suffering—but still, she bears unflinching witness.

Bookforum, December 21, 2010

Cleopatra: A Life

They called her the Queen of Kings. She built a kingdom into a mighty empire that stretched down the shimmering eastern coastline of the Mediterranean. She married—and murdered—her two younger brothers. She bankrolled Cesar and Antony and bore them both sons. She was worshipped as a goddess in her lifetime. She was lithe and darkhaired. She was not beautiful.

The scribes of her time were awestruck by her wit and money, never by her face—she was no Olympias, no Arsinoe II. The coin portraits she issued, our most accurate depictions of her, reveal a beaky little thing with a wide mouth and avid eyes, looking rather pleased with herself and resembling, of all people, Saul Bellow.

Why then this curious conspiracy (from Plutarch on) to recast Cleopatra VII, who lived from 69 B.C. until 30 B.C., as a great beauty? To market her—she who slept with only two men in her 39 years—as an insatiable sexual savant? (That the men in question were Julius Caesar and Mark Antony seems to speak more to her political ambition than any wantonness.) Why has this pragmatic and unprepossessing stateswoman been reduced to “the sum of her seductions?”

In her latest book, Stacy Schiff, the Pulitzer prize-winning biographer of Véra Nabokov and Benjamin Franklin, plucks at this riddle and what she discovers—about Cleopatra and the men who made her myth—is astonishing. To understand Cleopatra is to understand how ancient history was written, by whom and for whom, and why.

But first, Schiff must match her pen against the mischief-makers: Cicero and Horace, Shakespeare

and Shaw. Artists from Boccaccio to Brecht have had a go at Cleopatra: Dio made her simper, Dante plopped her in the second circle of Hell (her sin: lust), Michelangelo coiled snakes around her throat. She's been distorted in sculpture, on the stage, made everywhere the pin-up girl for female faithlessness, guile, and corruption.

Schiff hacks through myth, “the kudzu of history,” to search for the real woman. It's a formidable task—no papyri from Alexandria survive and other “lacunae are so regular as to seem deliberate.” Schiff's is therefore a ginger history, a model of circumspection. Ready to leave the “irreconcilable unreconciled,” she fills in the gaps with texture and context, careful speculation on places the queen would have been likely to go, duties she might have performed.

A large—perhaps too large—swathe of the book is steeped in the conditional. Still a portrait emerges of a Cleopatra we've yet to meet: less lurid, but no less compelling. Rather like Indira Gandhi or Benazir Bhutto, this daughter of a political dynasty was initiated quickly and brutally into her office and evinced an appetite for butchery all her own. She was an uncommonly gifted leader: a Greek who brought peace and prosperity to a nation of Egyptians, Syrians, Thracians, Buddhists, and Jews. She was the

descendent of powerful Ptolemy queens, zoologists, playwrights, who presided over Alexandria, that “first city of civilization” where anatomy was discovered and geometry imagined. She was not beautiful but she was resourceful, glib, and very clever. And if clever women are dangerous—as Euripedes liked to remind us—a woman rich and clever are often intolerable, especially in Rome, which shared none of Alexandria’s enlightened views toward women (according to Schiff, Roman women “enjoyed the same legal rights as infants and chickens”).

Rome abhorred her. She was the preening queen from the East, the richest person in the known world who snagged first Cesar, then Antony. Egypt’s coffers kept Rome running, and Cleopatra’s high-handedness and taste for pomp kept its citizens feeling shabby and captious. Cicero never forgave her. Octavian saw to it that coming generations never would.

How better to rally an exhausted kingdom to war than by playing on existing antipathies? Convincing his populace that sex-struck Antony would hand over Rome to his mistress, Octavian invaded Egypt and the Romans took control of the story, writing her defeat even as she fought desperately fortify Alexandria.

Already the death mask—those rumors of dangerous beauty—was being prepared to fit over the plain face of an extraordinary woman. “It is less threatening to believe her fatally attractive than fatally intelligent,” Schiff writes, and this sober account peels away the exaggerations, be they romantic or vindictive, revealing how this profoundly threatening figure was domesticated, how her vast powers reduced to mere prettiness.

This is not to say that Schiff has sapped the drama from the story. Our introduction to the young queen is unforgettable: twenty-one-year old Cleopatra, recently orphaned and exiled, stands under “the glassy heat of the Syrian sun.” Her brother has stolen the kingdom they were meant to rule together. Twenty thousand of his men move towards her from the East. In the windswept desert, she assembles a ragtag army with apparent calm. “The women in her family were good at this and so clearly was she,” write Schiff matter-of-factly, even as this indelible image of the focused young warrior-queen rocks our every preconception about Cleopatra. And even if her partnerships with Caesar and Antony were very likely mutually advantageous political alliances and not the grand passions of the legends, her romance with Antony—their pranks and play and inseparability—still delights.

Still, it must be admitted, that we see the queen at a remove, always; intimacy is impossible. Her voice is mostly missing. It's the people who wrote her story—the Page Sixers and propagandists of Cleopatra's day—whose (generally questionable) motivations have been most thoroughly explored. Even as we might rue how elusive Cleopatra proves, it's a piquant pleasure for a biography to so clearly affirm the power of the genre—to demonstrate that possessing the shimmering eastern coastline of the Mediterranean is very fine, but that possessing a good biographer is true security. For 2,000 years, Cleopatra has counted “among the losers whom history remembers, but for the wrong reasons.” Schiff's remarkable book makes a mighty restitution and gives the vanquished queen, finally, a happier afterlife.

Bookforum, November 1, 2010

Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology

David Abram, ecologist and author of *Spell of the Sensuous* (1996), is the hierophant of a group best described as environmental ecstasies—nature writers with a primary interest not in studying or saving the

earth, but in reveling in its metaphysical powers. In his new book, *Becoming Animal*, Abram is on a particularly complicated, mystical, and almost messianic mission: He wants to reclaim “creatureness”—our animal senses and subjectivity—in a society in thrall to the “cult of the expertise” and the tyranny of machines. He hopes to reintroduce us to a pungent, unpredictable world of “resplendent weirdness.”

The book is not, however, purely a call to the wild. Abram has a clear sense of the world we’re in and why it exists. “To identify with the sheer physicality of one’s flesh may well seem lunatic,” Abram writes, because the body is so vulnerable to “scars and the scorn of others, to diseases, decay, and death.” It’s understandable, the author points out, that we abstract our physical selves and seek sanctuary in virtual worlds. But—and here the book’s dervish dance of an argument begins—in doing so we renounce our vast stores of “mammalian intelligence” and our citizenship in the natural world. In an effort to counteract these tendencies, Abram delivers meandering disquisitions on birdsong, the beauty of shadows, indigenous lore, and why good rhythm can protect you from the wrath of sea lions.

Abram's sentences are lush, unpruned, and unfashionable: References to the "wombish earth" and "chthonic powers" pop up with dismaying frequency. But his indifference to irony, economy, and current literary fashions can also be refreshing. He allows himself to be expansive, sentimental, and more than a little mad ("The feathered ones," he writes of birds, "have long been crucial allies for our kind"). When he succeeds, his book is transformative, animated by piercing observations and hallucinatory intensity. He observes how his shadow, "never violating its Pythagorean proportions, expand[s] imperceptibly toward the eastern horizon." And how, in van Gogh's paintings, objects "are not situated *in* space but actively deploy or secrete the space between them." Still, he misfires with regularity: Cloying neologisms accrue ("mothertouch," "fathersong"), and everything is alive in a wide-eyed Disney movie kind of way (stones "hunker" adorably into the soil, his house "glowers" at him). Abram's peculiar consciousness can become so strong that the reader can feel stuck, even claustrophobic. To commune with the natural world, here, seems to mean communing with a world bearing Abram's unmistakable thumbprint.

Abram excoriates anything that mediates our relationship with the earth—shoes, chairs,

language—and his book falters when he shifts into activist mode. His prescriptions for addressing climate change and the devastation of biospheres (more farmer's markets, more oral storytelling) is naïve at best and dangerously feckless at worst. But in the end no one will read *Becoming Animal* for its authority or even its acuity. This lopsided book so exalts in imperfection and idiosyncrasy that it practically seems to celebrate its own blemishes. Its contradictions—solipsism mixed with compassion, overheated prose mixed with precise observation—couple to create a work of inconsistent genius.

Booforum, September 1, 2010

How to Become a Scandal: Adventures in Bad Behavior

Everything you think you know about James Frey is wrong. You're wrong about Eliot Spitzer, too, and Linda Tripp, and any number of those nutty and libidinous rogues in our public pillories. According to Laura Kipnis's coruscating new study of scandal, what we talk about when we talk about transgression is in a terrible muddle. We can't explain why one public figure's infidelities outrage us while another's

are ignored; why some can rehabilitate their reputations while others are permanent pariahs. “We lack any real theory of scandal,” writes Kipnis, whose taxonomy of misbehavior leads us “like latter-day Darwins in the Galapagos of human peccadillo,” tramping through the tabloid muck in search of specimens.

And what specimens she finds. She gleefully conjures up the ghosts of scandals past: Amy Fisher, the “Long Island Lolita”; “Astro-nut” Lisa Nowack, the spurned (and diapered) astronaut who stalked and pepper-sprayed her romantic rival; “Love Gov” Eliot Spitzer; and Linda Tripp, “Iago in a skirt.” As she revisits the scurrilous details, she finds that scandals (and the scandalized) can behave even more oddly than we had assumed. What gets the public’s blood boiling isn’t corruption, cruelty, or arrogance, Kipnis argues. The unpardonable root offense is the innocuous-sounding “failed self-knowledge,” which the author calls “scandal’s favorite theme.” The issue becomes, in a sense, the failure of humiliated public figures to hide (or at least recognize) their motives.

Why else would Linda Tripp’s “ugliness” be so harped on? According to Kipnis, we recoiled from Tripp’s face not out of misogyny, but because we were able to instantly, if unconsciously, discern her

real reasons for befriending—and betraying—Monica Lewinsky. Kipnis cites “facial psychologists” who argue that an ugly face “isn’t something you’re born with, it’s an emotional distortion transformed into a physical one.” She then goes further to suggest that Tripp, otherwise shrouded by vast quantities of blowsy blonde hair and oversized glasses, was repeatedly given up by her “renegade” mouth. When Tripp went on Larry King to insist that her actions were prompted by her “maternal” concern for the young intern, the public saw a “tight rictus” and bared teeth of “unacknowledged aggression.” According to Kipnis, Tripp’s unconscious “syntax of unnerving smiles”—along with her protests that she was trying to protect Lewinski—became intolerable to viewers primarily because they were so patently false.

This is conjecture of the most subjective, unscientific, and thrilling kind. Hypocrisy, hubris, and self-delusion are delightful intellectual tangles in Kipnis’s hands. The more baroque the neurosis, the more she savors the dissection. She shines particularly in her analysis of Sol Wachtler, former chief justice of the New York court of appeals and possessor of a personality so complex he seems to require his own entry in the DSM-IV. After dumping his mistress, the married Wachtler created a pair of inexplicably high-

maintenance alter-egos (one a tubby, toothless detective on his death bed) whom he used to stalk and blackmail her.

Why Wachtler would stalk a woman he'd broken up with is just one of the curious questions at the heart of the story. But the subconscious, we know, is sneaky, and Kipnis's Freudian diagnosis is as imaginative as Wachtler's bungled gambit. Kipnis suggests that Wachtler feigned "an exaggerated heterosexual fixation" (stalking) to conceal his real secret, and that "the punishment [he] solicited from society" was intended for another "crime" *not* on view. Kipnis presents "evidence" of the unnamed "crime" which dare not speak its name: Wachtler was a "trim and snappy dresser"; he was fascinated by a phallic snake tattoo; he had an intense friendship (turned equally intense enmity) with Andrew Cuomo; he seemed "asexual."

Kipnis's preference for insinuation feels priggish here, given her boldness elsewhere. Still, however indirect (and unverifiable) her claims, they reveal that there's much more in the trajectory of transgression than merely being bad, getting caught, and suffering the consequences. Sometimes the scandalous crave punishment. And sometimes (as Kipnis tries to argue in a mostly unpersuasive defense of James Frey), we

are scandalized because we need to expel a member of the community who threatens our cherished illusions.

Throughout, Kipnis exposes “the crucial roles we all have to play” in public outrages and ritual humiliations, and she’s refreshingly short on compassion. She’s interested in understanding our baser instincts, not in appealing to our better angels, and the book is all the more fun for it. She relishes that “smidge of ungovernability lodged deep at the human core,” and her search for a “theory of scandal” proves successful and wonderfully self-implicating: “Scandalizers keep ‘forgetting’ about social consequences, and scandal audiences keep ‘forgetting’ about how routine such lapses are,” she writes. “This ability to both know something and not know it at the same time appears to be a common trait uniting these two ostensibly disparate groups.” For both groups, a trip to the stocks is inevitable—in some deep way, humans are drawn to punishment as an experience and as a spectacle. But with Kipnis’s book as our guide, we might find a more profound—even merry—cast to our roles as punishers or penitents, enjoying how pitilessly scandal illuminates us at our most muddled, troubled, and true.

Bookforum, September 20, 2010

The Pregnant Widow

For all its ambition and verbal pyrotechnics, Martin Amis's *The Pregnant Widow* is basically a book about boys and girls—or rather, one boy and many girls. It's Amis's most nakedly autobiographical novel since *The Rachel Papers*, and when the narrator tells us, "Everything that follows is true," it isn't difficult to believe that Amis himself passed—as the book's Keith Nearing does—a sexually transformative and traumatizing summer in a castle in Italy on the cusp of the 1970s. And it's not just any castle—it's where D.H. and Freida Lawrence once vacationed. The book is drenched in allusion, not least because twentysomething Keith is a sad young literary man reading his way through the canon of the English novel. When, that is, he's not having dull sex with his dull girlfriend, Lily, and mooning over her pneumatic (and ponderously named) best friend, Scheherazade.

The love-triangle setup is classic Amis, and it's a measure of his skill (and a supporting cast straight out of a Fellini film) that he prolongs the payoff as long as he does, making this book a study of anticipation enlivened by some slapstick scenes (dwarf, trampoline) and sparkling prose. Amis's

pleasure in language is on full display (his characters don't masturbate, they engage in "applied narcissism"). Of course this enthusiasm can misfire; see Amis's unpardonably bad metaphors for breasts ("inseparable sisters," "twinning circumferences").

The structure creaks a bit as Amis stuffs *The Pregnant Widow*, self-referential and gravid with history as it is, with a shallow analysis of religious extremism and his usual moans about Islam. No one should read Amis for sociology. But one should read him for his descriptions (even characters' teeth are attended to with fetishistic precision), and one must read *The Pregnant Widow* for its evocation of youth without innocence, and of the sexual revolution's "tingle of license," where words—not just bodies—were liberated.

Time Out New York, May 13, 2010