“Fixedness is always momentary”
Octavio Paz [1]

“What is focus -and who has the right to say what is legitimate focus?”
Julia Margaret Cameron [2] (1866)

“It is a form of power that makes individual subjects”
Michel Foucault [3]

In 1989, an exhibition of a large selection of photographs with blurs, or even blurry photographs, was presented in Vanishing Presence, at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. The exhibition established the trajectory of the blur, ranging from the effects produced by technical inability to its subsequent use as an intentional resource [4]. These ‘defects’, like ghostly apparitions, continue to manifest, perhaps even more so, in the digital era. The present article attempts to address this type of fuzzy images (digital and analogical), their evocative and significant capacity, as well as to emphasize the power of the Gothic imagery (in the broadest sense) to represent the terrors of the present and the future [5].

Anonymous Portrait 1850- Atget

We often reject blurred photos, and the quality of reproduction devices on the market, such as television sets or photographic cameras is measured according to their definition. Beyond the negative connotations of the blur in its aesthetic sense, but which can also have a moral sense [6], the blurred image should not be equalled to a defective image. We shall now approach those ghosts of low quality and diffuse aspect to observe how they behave, or how they affect us.
Hito Steyer, in his article “In defense of the poor image”, draws a map of the world of poor images within the “class society of appearances”. [7]. If *Vanishing Presence* is the recognition of the importance of the blur, the article does the same with low quality digital images [8]. Steyerl describes a society in which high quality (clear-cut) images are at the top of the pyramid, versus poorly defined images, which are rejected from the system, ill-treated, despite being the “social base” of society.

Poor images, like blurs, barely deserve the name and therefore, they are only “the ghost of an image” [9]. The photographic blur and the low quality digital image share the fact that they have been referred to as ghosts due to their appearance, but also due to their situation; despised and soon recovered, dead and resurrected. We should consider them because of their important presence in number (threatening like the zombies) and their capacity to trigger thoughts when they achieve it, as described by Ernst van Alphen with the expression to “shock into thought” [10].

That images live together in society is no novelty of the digital world [11], although in that environment it has been extensively virtualized. That is, it has been formalized in a digital environment made up of globally interconnected places [12]. Living together in community is determinant to understanding the role of the blurred image when triggering thoughts. The images, which form condensations in the ghostly textual community, can reincarnate in other images, survive, or awaken their geographical neighbours by means of links or hyperlinks. In this sense, theoreticians and artists like Aby Warburg or Gerhard Richter have worked with and on the atlas, and thousands of users-creators continue to do so each day on the Internet. Not to form a classic historiographic discourse, based strictly on chronology, causal relations, or to establish a linear story, but to carry out a dialogue beyond the barriers of time, place, and class in that society of images [13]. The press cutting and the low quality digital image may be as important as the ‘masterpieces’ when reincarnating in what Warburg calls the “history of ghosts for adults,” within that coming and going in the “spool of the memory” [14]. The photographic archive initiated by Warburg, and even the panels that make up his famous *Atlas Mnemosyne*, are full of low-quality images, like the Web. Press cuttings, fuzzy photocopies and prints (often undocumented), live side to side with documented reproductions and original ‘full HD’ prints in cardboard folders. The history of art has been devoured by the World Wide Web’s hunger, and there it revives, like a spectre travelling around its castle, but maybe it always was a ghost story.

*Before the onset of digital technology and before the blur gained foothold within the artistic technique, those indeterminate spots, luminous and often with anthropomorphic traits, were a part of the so-called photography of spirits [15]. Beyond fraud, in which the blur was involved from its very beginning, fuzzy images reveal a view of the world that*
escapes the eye. Some might even think that it steals it, or perhaps we should specify that it is stealing it. Even though they are static impressions, they reflect the abstraction of the idea of movement, of presence and absence, of capture and escape; just as the lines in comic-books express “this is moving”, or the incipient rottenness of an apple “this expires”, “it disappears”. [16]. It would not be true to say that the blur represents movement because it is static, but it evokes it by destroying the totality and the certainty of a clear-cut image [17]. The phantom represents a loss rather than a presence, and the act of fading away.

YouTube - Sam Taylor-Wood - Still Life (2001)

Part of the evocative power of the blur may be related to its Gothic-ghostly aspect, with the terrifying or sublime suggestions it provokes [18]. Indefinition is a commonplace in Gothic literature, from Walpole until our days, and many of the most sinister moments of art-horror [19], occur by means of that indetermination. As noted by Lovecraft, a habitual user of indeterminate and indescribable terror, the authenticity of the story is determined by the feelings provoked by the atmosphere, not by the plot or the drawing [20]. We do not only refer to literature. In the political sphere, Marx constantly used figures like ghosts, spectres, alchemists, and vampires [21]. A Gothic vocabulary with which the public is quite familiar, and very adequate to the incipient industrial society that is born together with the success of the Gothic novel, but also adequate to refer to the current digital world: “A spectre is haunting Europe” began the well-known manifesto that he wrote with Engels [22].

The blur, indefiniteness, or pixelation, can lend credibility. Gerhard Richter, a habitual user of the blur, stated that it clarified the content and made the representation believable [23]. If realism is implausible, the objectivity of precise representation is dubious, it destroys illusion because reality (?? realities?) is perceived as blurred, and what is real is indeterminate. Richter has considered that the power of a normal photograph, turned into another thanks to his interventions, can be greater than any distortion by Dali or Bacon [24]. When mentioning such significant authors, Richter establishes the bridge of the blur towards pictorial distortion. If we linked the map of the analogical photographic blur and the low quality digital image, here, too, we should make room for the effect in painting, towards the past.

Ernst van Alphen writes, with reference to Bacon, that the “incessant emphasis on the need for distortion in order to represent the ‘real’ appearance of somebody can be understood as a fight against stereotypical representations of the
subject” [25]. Distortion and the blur have in common their opposition to the objectified image of the subject and his mortification [26]. Although in this chapter, dedicated to the modern portrait, van Alphen alludes to the other strategies that do not imply a breach with the clear-cut image (i.e., Rineke Dijkstra), his words could be applied to the blurred-portrait: what “Bacon depicts its exactly the fight between subject and representation” [27] and with Foucault’s words, we could add, because it links it to “his own individuality, it ties him to his own identity, it enforces a real law he must recognize in himself. It is a form of power that makes individual subjects” [28], just as when we complete an online profile, we complete a CV, we attach a photo or we tell our whole life in a paragraph [www.imaginarrar.net/miembros2.htm].

Self-portraits, Patrick Tosani (www.patricktosani.com) ] [ Below: Poster of The invisible man and image from the work Confess all on video... by Gilliam Wearing.

The blurred portrait breaks away from the supposed objectivity and the capacity to capture the soul (?) of the traditional portrait, where there is no soul, only facets. The struggle between subject and representation may result in distortion and blur, it is part of the much remarked-on exhaustion trying to maintain the subject's unity, but a ghost is still a monster, a sample of the past.
Blurred portraits like those of Patrick Tosani relapse visually in issues about the concept of identity and they dispute the objective portrait. But what sort of individual-monster is he whose face is blurry?

Steyerl quotes among the poor images a scene in Woody Allen’s *Deconstructing Harry* (1997) that shows this from the counterpoint viewpoint of humour.

*YouTube - Deconstructing Harry-blurry*

Associated with Tosani, the scene goes back to the portrait and the identity but, in practice, the ghost individual is the object of derision. If, as Woody Allen said, “it is terribly hard to find your slippers” when you get up when you’re dead [29], it is just as difficult to wash your face and go to work when you are blurry. The distorted representation resists being held, but being blurred is annoying and impairs communication.

Viewing this scene on YouTube takes me to another perspective. The rest of the characters of the film are blurry, contaminated by their own disease. All are blurred in YouTube after being ripped (torn up and hung out) [30], and partake in the world of low-quality images. Cinema is blurry in YouTube, Internet is full of ghosts despite the efforts to extend high definition by means of high-speed channels. Images turn into a mixture of undifferentiated forms until one looks at them as unique or reactivates them like ectoplasm.

It is not a question of saying that everything goes within this mixture, but that what is useful is incrusted within a whole, and that whole is valid as a monstrous ensemble. The atlas is more than a repertory from which to select images. As a group and generating process, it becomes material for thought, or a thinking thing, constantly changing and growing. Not only Richter’s or Warburg’s Atlases but also, or even more so, YouTube.
Ruff’s series Nächte [Nights] is made up of images taken in residential areas at night between 1992 and 1996 [31]. The quality of the image evokes devices associated with the military sphere, so often seen in the media [32]. The referent lingers floating in the extension of my network memory. And that same memory, suggests that there are certain qualities in the image, blurred and pixel-like, that remind us of violent contexts. In the case of Nächte [Nights], this sinister aspect is linked to military technology. One asks why do the images we almost always see produced in such contexts have such low quality when such advanced technological systems produce them?

Thomas Ruff's jpeg series are made up of various groups of images which name (jpeg ny, jpeg nt...) alludes to the provenance (New York, nuclear test, etc.). Although they are 'unoccupied' images, they allude directly to the human being or to his destruction. The motive of the original images is intuited, and in some cases, such as those from 9/11, are recognized. In the subtitled jpegs, there is a strong feeling of déjà vu.

We recognize them because we have seen them in the media, although we often do not know exactly where. The echo of destruction is powered by the vision of the whole series, but also by the referents we find in our extension Google images, for example (type “bunker” or “atomic bomb” to complete the image). Beyond the initial impression that its presence propititates, it returns the referents back to us. The works of Ruff make sense because their contemplator has previous experience; they are recognized.

Ruff’s Jpegs go back to the ‘original’ mediated images, reproduced and pixelated, which I see every day in the media; they invite one to revisit them. I also find the visual links in the extension of my YouTube memory, macro-archive within the Internet archive. I may never have seen some of these sequences before, but they awaken the memory of having seen them.
The content could be summarized as the recording of the firing of a guided missile at a group of “numerous individuals on the road” [33]. But the images themselves that maintain the slyness of the massacre, the breathing, the giggles... “oh, dude!”... the video is much more.

What is interesting... (and while I write, I think that to call the recording of a bloodbath interesting is in itself terrifying) is that watching it is contradictory (to me). It takes no effort to see it, I do not close my eyes despite being aware of observing how at least a dozen people are being slaughtered in an instant. I can see it, lost in my reflection, just a few pixels... in just a few seconds.

The YouTube ‘community rules’ are also contradictory, in particular the epigraph ‘do not cross the line’:

- No explicit or gratuitous violence is allowed. If there is some person who is assaulted, attacked, or humiliated in your video, do not publish it.
- YouTube is not a place in which to publish shocking images. Do not publish shocking videos of accidents, corpses, and so on [34].

Is this not explicit or are those dots not people?

Perhaps by ‘explicit’, the rules do not refer so much to explicit violence as to explicit images, in the sense of sharpness (the line). Clear-cut violence is forbidden. Objectively, it is a blurry image, each individual is represented by a few pixels, like in a videogame. It could be fiction, but there is something (an atmosphere of terror, the breathing...) that tells me that no, it is not a fake. [35]. It could be fiction, but it would still be real. The pixelation here is a mark of truth and a barrier against it.

But the low quality and the blurred image are not only associated with the military sphere in the media, but also with security cameras or mobile recording devices, which are increasingly frequent for personal use. The mass media are constantly fed by and they feed us such material.

Both the blur and pixelation fulfill a similar function and they turn the representation of the individual into a paradoxical
This image was published in 2002 in the daily press. We can clearly see the faces, but the map is completely pixelated, hiding the details of a plan. The target, the object, is distorted so we can see it without recognizing it. The map is an abstraction of the territory (thus we do not see the people and their lives), but it has also been pixelated, so we cannot recognize the geography either. Just as with the video Attacking the troop, the mediation of the war system turns a group of individuals into pixels in movement. Paradoxically, videogames are increasingly more detailed, in contrast to the killings increasingly more similar to the massive destruction of Martians, or of Pac-man, of other times.

While I write this article, I find this image [36]. It shows a morgue in Caracas, the faces and genitals of the dead have been distorted by pixelation [37]. The aseptic corruption of the image by the pixel announces the incipient corruption of the real cadaver in a sinister way. Corruption of the image and of the dead body.

The constant appearance of pixelation in certain images like this one suggests the association with a context of violence. A binomial of protection-aggression [38], but they also warn about a dangerous ‘depersonalizing’ gesture. Increasingly, the path to high definition is sought, but the blur is still omnipresent through digital images, compressed and transmitted in personal devices. In the news bulletins we often see sequences of natural disasters, floods, flash-floods, hail and storms that always have the stamp of low quality and immediacy. There is always some disclosure of secrets by hidden cameras; either the latest case of school bullying, or the smashing a jeweller’s show-case, or the robbery of a gas station are denounced, we see it through that filter of low definition which contrasts with the defined and orderly framework of the news bulletin. This happens every day. Here, the fuzziness has more to do with the technology of the devices than with the intentionality of masking; however, it is unavoidable for us to associate such violence to that particular quality of the image and to a certain proximity.

The blur has, in general (at least this is how I see it), a contradictory capacity that invites one to speculate about the very images. Blurs are significant because they allude to our memory. They are spectra because they are partly a spectacle,
but also because of their sense of returning the dead [39]. Blurred images have the capacity of resuscitating, but they do so with a ghostly, transparent, or corrupt appearance, revealing their true spectral nature [40]. As with the zombies, its decomposition plays the role of Vanitas in the world of images, betraying the frailty of beauty and the falseness of its stillness.

Footnotes


[4] Vanishing Presence was commissioned by Adam D. Weinberg and exhibited for the first time in the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis at the beginning of 1989. The catalogue was edited the same year by the same center and by Rizzoli, in Minneapolis and New York. The blur was very soon used by artists like Julia Margaret Cameron for their own benefit, as will be seen in Vanishing Presence. As one contemporary reviewer noted, “Julia Margaret Cameron was the first person to see that her mistakes were her success” Vanishing Presence, ibid. p. 66. The blur has been used in a totally conscious way with very diverse expressive uses by different authors. The exhibition presented this array from the beginnings of photography until 20th century creators, like the photographers William Klein, Ralph Eugene Meatyard, Francesca Woodman, or Patrick Tosani, among others. Although, of course, the digital blur was excluded from it.

[5] I know that to use the Gothic concept this way may be controversial; however, I believe that it is not at all an obsolete term, of which The Gothic, by Gilda Williams (Ed.) [Documents of Contemporary Art, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 2007] and Contemporary Gothic, by Catherine Spooner (London, Reaktion Books, 2006), are a small sample. Likewise, I use the term Gothic in its broadest sense, not as an exclusively literary genre made fashionable by H. Walpole or with reference to the late medieval architecture, but to an extensive and open category that joins The Castle of Otranto with The Cure and -why not?- with the ghosts of the digital era. In this sense, publications like the well-known Gothic. Four Hundred Years of Excess, Horror, Evil and Ruin by Richard Davenport-Hines [London, Fourth Estate, 1998] have also made an impact. The close relation between technology and Gothic terror has been noted by diverse authors, but the images of Gothic terror are also very appropriate to reflect the modern world [Cfr. Martin Tropp in Images of Fear, David Skal in Monster Show, etc.] and, from my own viewpoint, the postmodern world even more so, and in particular, the digital environment.

[6] In Spanish, blur (borrón) is, by definition, a drop of ink that spots the paper, the outline of a text, or sketch in painting, but also an imperfection that disfigures, or a discreditable action that ruins one’s reputation. Diccionario de la RAE, 2001, p. 345.

Although he refers to digital images, some of his proposals easily extend to blurred images.

By 'thought' here, I refer to that triggering to which van Alphen alluded repeatedly during the seminar that led to the present publication. The specific expression was “shock into thought”, which is not necessarily a verbalized thought, perhaps the triggering of new images and echoes.

For example, Roland Barthes, in the beginning of his Camera Lucida attempted to determine the essential trait of photography in the “community of images”. Barthes, R., La cámara lúcida. Notas sobre la fotografía, Madrid, Paidós, 2009, p. 25.

It is important to be very cautious about the idea of a global network world because not everything is there, nor does everyone have access to it.

By 'atemporality', I do not refer to ignoring time, but to consider the relations of the past with the future, independently of the traditional structures and classifications, to travel freely like in Back to the future (Robert Zemeckis, 1985)

Quoted in Didi-Huberman, G., La imagen superviviente. Historia del arte y tiempo de los fantasmas [The surviving image. History of art and time of the ghosts], Madrid, Abada, 2009, pp. 79 and 82


The paradox of these images goes back to their construction, and particularly to the origins of photography, when prolonged and exhausting poses (to die in life) were necessary to be immortalized, in contrast to the blot that represented restlessness, the refusal to pose, or the unawareness of the process being carried out, with the gesture of movement thus being mortified, but not the individual’s mask.

The intermission to which Edmund Burke referred in his philosophical inquiry is quite close to some of the feelings that the blot can generate. The quotation of Spencer that Burke presents seems to be more than appropriate: “A vague shadow of uncertain light, / like a lamp, whose life fades away. / Or like a moon dressed in a foggy night / it shows itself to those who walk with fear and great terror”. In Burke, E., Indagación filosófica acerca de nuestras ideas acerca de lo sublime y de lo bello [Philosophical Inquiry about Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful], Madrid, Tecnos, 2001, p. 63. It would also be very interesting to verify how, among the causes that Burke attributed to the beautiful, those with
a very graphic and clear-cut nature (such as physiognomy, the gaze, ugliness) predominate over the more abstract or indefinite causes of the sublime (light, colour, sound, noise, etc.).


[20] Lovecraft, at the beginning of his essay on horror said, “the oldest and most intense fear is the fear of the unknown”, to which he added subsequently, “The most important factor is the atmosphere, because the ultimate criterion of authenticity does not reside in a well-woven plot, but in knowing how to create a certain feeling”. Lovecraft, H. P., El horror en la literatura [Horror in Literature], Madrid, Alianza Editorial, 2002, pp. 7 and 11, respectively.

[21] The recent exhibition of the Red Specter, Fetiches Críticos [Critical Fetishes] www.espectrorojo.com/1/pdf/el_espectro_rojo.pdf, in the Art Center Dos de Mayo in Móstoles, showed some of these terrifying aspects of current capitalism, from the very presentation of the exhibition. Gothic imagination and the political-economic world are closely united and not only in the work of Marx, as first noted by Chris Baldickien in In Frankenstein’s Shadow [Claredon Press, Oxford 1987], but also in numerous images (excuse the self-citation:) as I have documented extensively in El vampiro como imagen-reflejo [ibid.]. Cartoons for the Cause by Walter Crane is a sample of this. While reviewing this text, I read this critique by David Trueba in El País (digital) of November 16, 2010: “If we remove the laughs from Bush’s book [Decision points] perhaps we will be left with a story of Gothic terror with some outstanding Spanish scenarios to promote touristically.”


[23] It is not surprising that Gerhard Richter should attribute more truth to the blurred representation because truth and realism are not necessarily linked. “The flowing transitions, the smooth, equalizing surface clarify the content and make the representation credible”. Richter adds, “I blur things to make everything equally important and equally unimportant. I blur things so that they not look artistic or craftsmenlike but technological, smooth and perfect. I blur things to make all the parts a closer fit. Perhaps I also blur out the excess of unimportant information”. In Elger, D. & Obrist, H. U. (Eds.), Gerhard Richter. Text. Writings, Interviews and Letters 1961-2007, London, Thames & Hudson, 2009, p. 33.


[26] Barthes in his Camera Lucida, to whom van Alphen also refers, proposed photography as mortification. Barthes, ibid., p. 32. Barthes also said that the "contortions of technique" and "the voluntary exploitation of certain effects" did not convince him, although he admitted to understanding their subversive capacity (p. 51).

[27] Van Alphen, ibid., p. 32.


[30] In Spanish, the term ripear, from the English rip, reminds one of “Ripio: the residual left over from something”. Rubble or fragments of bricks, stones, and other building materials that are rejected or broken, used to fill in hollows of walls or floors”. Or ripiar, which in Cuba means “to smash something to pieces” (Diccionario de la RAE). In English rip, like slit or tear or... perhaps RIP, rest in peace?

[31] Ruff also worked with newspaper cuttings. Zeitungsfotos [Newspaper photos] from the 90s, enlarging them like jpegs and, in this sense, a clear evolution can be established of the photographic dotting of the newspaper impression to the visible pixelation. Concerning these cuttings, see, for example, the Thomas Ruff catalogue Surfaces, Depths, Vienna, Kunsthalle Wien, 2009.

[32] It was precisely the media covering of the I Gulf War that aroused Ruff’s interest in this kind of images; Ibid., p. 42

[33] In the dialogue, these pixels in movement are identified as individuals: “I’ve got numerous individuals on the road. Do you want me to take those out?” “Take them out.”

[34] http://www.youtube.com/t/community_guidelines

[35] As a counterpoint, see in YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N94RirLi_cA

[36] Published in El Nacional de Caracas on August 13. The image shows the morgue of Monte Bello in Caracas.

[37] It is not a question here of protecting the portrayed people, already dead, but of protecting the observers from the view of the faces (recognition by family members) and the modesty of sexual organs, but showing the lamentable conditions of this morgue. The image generated a debate, also including the excuse to exercise political censure, between the need to denounce a situation of overload and neglect of the morgue and protection from its contemplation by the public.

[38] It is not always a threat of direct violence. As well known, minors cannot be shown in the media without a previous paternal authorization, protecting their identity, maybe not from direct violence, as in the case of witnesses or the forces of law and order, but from being pointed out and somehow assaulted.

[39] Along the lines of Barthes’ Spectrum, ibid., p. 30

[40] ‘Poor’ images are those that play the role of the predators in the food chain of images. They are the ones who devour their superiors, corrupting them and corroding them, as if they were zombies, to subsequently revive them turned into the “rubble of the audiovisual production”, in Steyerl’s words (ibid.). The second section of Steyerl’s article is precisely entitled “Resurrection (as Poor Images)” and refers especially to how experimental and essayistic cinema has been able
to revive, precisely thanks to these new diffusion channels: “Many works of avant-garde, essayistic, and non-commercial cinema have been resurrected as poor images” and, further on, “The poor image embodies the afterlife of many former masterpieces of cinema and video art”.

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