The Atrocity of Representing Atrocity. Watching Kevin Carter's 'Struggling Girl'

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Abstract: Taking Kevin Carter's famous photograph of a Sudanese 'Struggling Girl' as an example, this article shows by criticizing the work of photography scholar Ariella Azoulay who argues for an ethic, reparative spectatorship that focuses on the social encounters behind the photograph, how discussions about atrocity photography often result in moral debates: discussions that center around the social relations behind photography and blame the photographer, but do not take into account and criticize the photographic representation of the atrocity. By giving an overview of the afterlife of Carter's photograph, the articles shows how such a 'social' focus on photography, easily reaffirms the social inequalities that lies within the practices of atrocity photography.

SINCERE PHOTOGRAPHS OVERWHELMED BY THEIR CONTEXT

At the moment Kevin Carter's photograph of a very young, starving Sudanese child, being closely watched by an approaching vulture, was published in the *New York Times* on March 26, 1993, spectators did not react in the way they are supposed to react (See fig. 1). Atrocity pictures are ordinarily used to let spectators feel emotionally connected to the photographed subject, yet this specific photograph did not succeed in arousing its desired effects.[1] Namely, the spectators of Carter's photograph reacted with more than just the intended feelings of compassion and guilt for the pictured victim. They focused their attention on something that was not literally visible in the photograph: the photographer. The most frequently asked and somewhat
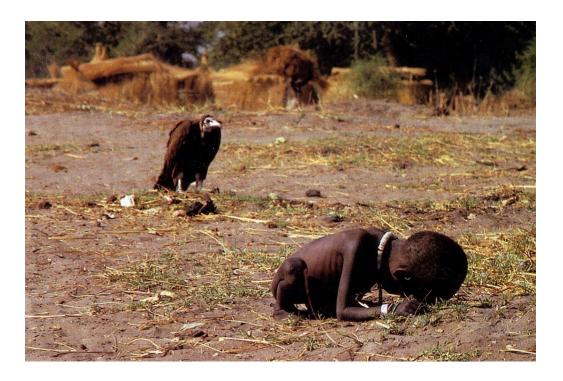
Figure 1: Photo: Kevin Carter

naïve question of the *New York Times* readers was: 'Did the photographer stop and help this suffering child?'[2] When it became clear that Carter had done nothing to help the little girl, he was broadly criticized in popular media.

Although I do not readily agree with the condemnation of Carter's action—an easy moral judgment that, as I will make clear in this article, simplifies the practice of atrocity photography—I nevertheless believe that this widespread reaction must be seriously considered.[3] Leaving my views on Carter's inaction aside for now, I rather question whether this negative response to the photograph in the popular media was in any way an appropriate reaction. We can at least notice that the spectators' way of looking at this atrocity photograph was peculiar. Despite the fact that almost nothing in the photograph 'betrays' the presence of the photographer—neither the child nor the vulture look into the camera after all—spectators went so far as to reinsert the photograph back into its original context to reconstruct the encounter between the photographer and the photographed subject.[4]

In light of their condemnation of Carter, who in their eyes made not one, but two immoral choices since he made no effort to help the child and let her suffer in order to capture an emotive shot, the spectators of Carter's photograph acted as ideal spectators. If we follow the arguments of the famous photography scholar Ariella Azoulay, whose ideas are widely acknowledged in recent photography criticism/philosophy, such concerned spectators are 'citizens of photography'. According to Azoulay our 'ethic responsibility' as spectators towards photographs is to rehabilitate the gap between the 'still'

photograph and the active practice of photography, between the printed image and the photographic event: that is, the event that occurred between the photographer and the photographed subject.[5] When spectators recognize the photograph as a trace of an actual event and look beyond the frame of the photograph, they begin to realize that the meaning of photographs is not restricted to the photographer or to those who participate in their production and publication.[6] As long as the photograph is viewed (in the right way), the event of photography continues and the photograph can acquire new meanings. And this is exactly what happened when newspaper readers responded to Carter's photograph the way they did. They gave the photograph a documentary (albeit temporary) significance, an alternative way of looking at it. To them the photograph no longer depicted the miserable fate of a young child in need of help, but testified against Kevin Carter's decision to shoot, rather than aid the victim. Since, as Azoulay remarks, no single participant of the event of photography—that is, photographer, photographed, and spectator—can claim full authority over a photograph's final meaning, the practice of photography appears to be 'a new tribunal, a universal and impartial judge that could do justice to the past, present and future'.[7]

While I appreciate Azoulay's 'citizens of photography', her emancipatory approach raises additional concerns. Can spectators actually do justice to the unequal power-relations existing between the photographer and the photographed child; or between them, as privileged spectators, and the child; by focusing on the event of photography, that is, on the social relationships behind the photograph? Does the spectators' realization that the meaning of the photograph cannot be appropriated by a single person, automatically make all participants of photography 'formally equal individuals'?[8] Can we speak of a 'reparative spectatorship' if we look at the controversy that Carter's photograph initiated and its consequences?

Faced with an exemplary situation, availed by the global circulation of Carter's photograph, we see what happens when spectators focus on the event of photography. I thus question Azoulay's assumption that spectators can simply and in all cases do justice to the atrocity that took place before the camera by acting as 'citizens of photography'. Although photographs within the practice of atrocity photography, such as this one by Carter, are mostly made with good intentions—photographers mean them to arouse concern for the situation depicted, provoke indignation, and move viewers to action—the public's particular response to Carter's photograph demonstrates how Azoulay's proposed way of looking at photographs rarely repairs the inequalities between the participants of the event of photography.[9] Contrarily, as shown below by my retracing the impact made by reprinting Carter's photograph and their corresponding debates in the popular media, the unequal differences between the photographed girl on the one hand, and the photographer Carter (and with him the privileged, mostly Western, spectators) on the other, actually increased at the very moment the photograph started to

provoke moral outrage.[10] One could say that the distraction caused by the readers' concerns overpowered the photograph's point, turning attention to the spectators instead. Discussions about Carter's despondence as a photographer overwhelmed the terrible Sudanese situation, for which Carter's symbolic photograph was his attempt to prompt Western compassion/action.We thus cannot speak of a 'reparative spectatorship' brought on by the spectators' focus on the social relations behind the photograph, as Azoulay claims.

More important, since the focus of the 'ideal spectatorship' that Azoulay argues for lies primarily (or even exclusively) with the participants of photography (the photographed subject, the photographer, and the spectator), the photograph as a representation of the atrocity is easily left out of view. Therefore, in contrast to the often-held 'moralized' discussions about Carter's job as a photographer, I turn to atrocity photograph itself and its shortcomings in depicting atrocities. Starting with the original publication of Carter's photograph as a problematic representation of an atrocity, we will soon see how such photographs and the machinery behind them, can be seen as not only participating in the very atrocity they aim to capture, but exploiting the situation to gain attention for whatever publication prints them. This is a crucial element of the practice of atrocity photography that should be recognized. Any spectator who does not recognize the often-problematic representation of atrocity in atrocity photography risks becoming guilty of reenacting the atrocity. Although some inevitable shortcomings of atrocity photography cannot be overcome by any kind of spectatorship, a more inclusive spectatorship that includes how the photograph functions and acknowledges the underlying power structures implicit in atrocity photography, would at least diminish the risk that spectators will affirm and perpetuate these unequal power structures.

SERIOUS PHOTOGRAPHS DIVORCED FROM THEIR CONTENT

Carter's terrifying photograph was first published to illustrate a *New York Times* article about the deadly famine in Sudan were people were dying at the rate of fifteen people per hour.[11] Printed on the newspaper's front cover, adjacent an article entitled 'Sudan is Described as Trying to Placate the West,' the article addressed how the famine in Southern Sudan was the outcome of the long-term civil war between the Muslim-Arab North and the predominantly black and Christian South.[12] As a result of this ongoing conflict, all supply lines to the South had been blocked and this famine-stricken region had been long inaccessible to Western relief organizations. This situation was beginning to change, however, as the article explained that the Sudanese government was opening up parts of the disaster region to Western help. Contrary to the article's optimism, the caption accompanying the photograph read: '[B]ut for some it could be too late. A little girl weakened

from hunger, collapsed recently along the trail to a feeding center in Ayod. Nearby, a vulture waited'.[13]

Considering the complicated political situation this article describes, it's odd that the editor would select such an immediate photograph. The photograph not only shows a vulnerable naked girl and an animal, whose distance to its human prey is difficult to guess because of the perspective from which the photograph is taken, but it says absolutely nothing about the political situation in Sudan. Readers cannot infer the enormous magnitude of the famine, let alone that a civil war had caused her miserable situation or that the Sudanese government had rebuffed efforts by Western relief organizations. The 'poverty' of the image and its depoliticized character hardly corresponds to the political problems discussed in the article. It is therefore not surprising that the *New York Times* readers were less upset by the problems in Sudan than with a photograph that scarcely related to the situation at hand. So many people contacted the newspaper to ask what had happened to the child that four days later the editor posted this note: 'The photographer reports that she recovered enough to resume her trek after the vulture was chased away. It is not known whether she reached the center'.[14]

Only a few news organizations, such as *Time* and the South African *Globe and Mail*, reprinted the photograph. However, when the photograph quite unexpectedly won the Pulitzer Prize in 1994, the photograph appeared widely across news media. Although the photograph was widely praised because for its photographic qualities, criticism quickly overwhelmed positive reactions. Each time the photograph was reprinted, it evoked the same discomfort as with its first publication. The initial questions about the girl's fate started to be accompanied by widespread discussions about the practice of photojournalism.[15] Time after time, these discussions questioned Carter's behaviour, especially after more details about his encounter with the girl and the vulture became known. Carter admitted that he had acted carefully not to disturb the bird, how he had positioned himself to capture the best possible image, and waited twenty minutes for the vulture to spread its wings. When the vulture failed to do as he had hoped, he chased the vulture away and witnessed the little girl as she resumed her struggle.[16] Carter's photograph, now equally his own story, continued to outrage spectators worldwide. In the *St. Petersburg Time*, for example, a journalist remarked how the photographer claiming to take his time, so as to shoot the girl's suffering, is no less a predator than the real vulture depicted in the scene.[17]

After Kevin Carter committed suicide in 1994, the photograph's meaning changed again. Some people even connected his death to this photograph, a photograph that was suddenly considered 'fatal'. The photograph was published once again in the *New York Times*, this time accompanying his obituary, indirectly suggesting that the photograph's negative fame led Carter to kill himself, since he 'always carried around the horror of the work he did'.[18] In light of these sentences, the *New York Times* perpetuated a narra-

tive of resentment, soon adopted by the rest of the media, suggesting that a photo-journalist had, as it were, paid the price for a mistake that he made while reporting a story. Within this narrative, Carter was reimagined as an incomprehensible hero who had risked his whole life to bring atrocities to the attention of his primarily Western audience, absent the praise he so deserved. This hero-narrative is never so obvious as in the documentary *The Death of Kevin Carter* (2004), which describes Carter as: 'this wonderful, tough, sexy photographer, [. . .] impatient with the people who did not understand what he was doing'.[19] Whereas Carter had been seen on par with the vulture, this documentary places him on par with the photographed girl, since both suffered in their encounter. Consider the documentary's description of his death: 'The pain, the suffering was over'.[20]

As we can conclude from this short overview of the afterlife of Carter's photograph, the initial attention for the girl's fate was gradually replaced by a focus on the photographer, first characterized as immoral, and then as an incomprehended hero. As a result of the photograph's fame, Kevin Carter himself became famous. His name is known worldwide; the girl, on the other hand, is still anonymous, and her fate unknown. In retracing the different phases of Carter's photograph from an illustration of the Sudanese famine to evidence of the photographer's immoral decision, and a story of resentment, we realize how the photograph offers a window onto various social encounters—a view, that according to Azoulay has the potential to do justice to the 'captured atrocity'. However, when we recognize how many social relationships are invested in this image, the inequalities between the photographer and the photographed girl are intensified, rather than reduced.

The spectators of Carter's photograph saw in his image the photographer's failure to witness, since he himself didn't respond to the atrocity occurring before his camera. Jay Prosser remarks how 'the viewer[s] of such a photograph [would] not want to replicate the failure of witnessing,' but in the end, this is exactly what the viewers of Carter's photograph did, however unintentionally.[21] Given their singular focus on the photographer's behaviour, they replicate his failure to witness. Although viewers' judgments of Carter are understandable, had they seized a broader perspective on the photograph's condition that not only included the social relations behind the photograph, but the image itself, they might have realized how their repeat rants reiterated the atrocity before them.

What the spectators failed to see, and what is missing throughout the primarily moral debate surrounding Carter's photograph is the fact that the photograph is not only a representation of an atrocity, but it is also part of an atrocity itself. A risk in Azoulay's approach of focusing primarily on the social encounters before and after the moment of taking an actual photograph is the problem of photography itself, the way the act of representing an atrocity remains out of view. Therefore in this paper's third section, I focus on the photograph itself within the context of atrocity photography, or even more

specifically famine photography, and the photograph as a problematic source for representing atrocities.

SENSATIONAL PHOTOGRAPHS DOOMED BY THEIR PURPOSE

If we place Carter's world-famous photograph back into its lesser known, original context, we notice how the atrocity is reiterated here in the medium, its representation. What does Carter use to 'illustrate' the deadline famine in Sudan? It shows one very young, lonely child whose body is so starved that she can barely carry her head. Her skin's darkness and swollen belly identify the child as African, while her necklace and bracelet signify femininity.[22] Apart from these adornment, the struggling girl is naked. Except for the vulture, no one else seems present in this barren, dried out landscape.

As already noted, the picture ignores the political context of the Sudanese famine, thereby depoliticizing the complex circumstances that have caused this girl's miserable fate. Based solely on that what we observe in the photograph, the spectators lack clues required to understand the cause of the famine, the vulnerable girl's status, or where in Africa this event is occurring. The only visible threat is the vulture, as if this atrocity has a natural, rather than a political cause. The photograph thus fails to explain the inherently political nature of the Sudanese famine.[23] Although people often argue that atrocity photography at least brings oft-overlooked tragedies to the public's attention, the public's initial reaction to this photograph should lead one to question this assumption. In this case, the representation, or rather misrepresentation, distracts attention from the very problem the photograph meant to highlight. Failing to represent the 1993 Sudanese famine, it is seen as an image of 'famine', 'mass starvation in Africa', and is considered among some as a 'universal icon of human suffering.'[24]

If we think about the broader ideas Carter's image of struggling girl conveys, what is left of her individuality? Her naked, vulnerable, female black body is clipped from its political context, no longer belongs to the girl herself. Hariman and Lucaites describe such images as 'individuated aggregate,' since the struggling girl represents a collective experience, even though she is just one person. In the metonymical structure of the individuated aggregate, a broad problem (famine) is reduced to a specific embodiment (child).[25] Even though the difference in economic, political, and socio-cultural status between the photographer and the anonymous girl were enormous to start with, his taking her picture both reaffirms and reinforces his privileged position in comparison to her subordinated position. In this photographic moment, the photographer 'takes' human subjects and 'uses' them to instrumentalize subjective matter, thereby enacting the 'eye of power.'[26]

Were we to focus on the social relations 'behind' the photograph, as Azoulay recommends, we would discover yet another outcome of the photographic moment, whereby the photographer has made the girl into a represen-
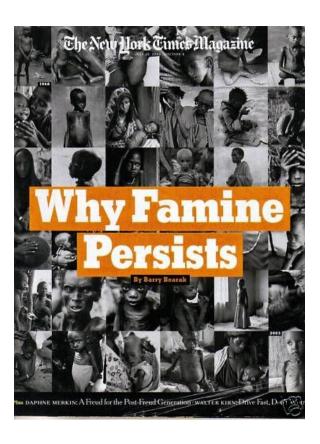
Figure 2: 'Why Famine Persists' Cover *New York Times Magazine.* 13 July 2003.

tative object, enabling prosperous spectators to treat her like an empty vessel for their pity.[27] Meanwhile, the photographer has become a privileged observer who has the power to turn human subjects into pitiful photographic objects, an action so powerful that spectators do this whenever they regard such photographs. Azoulay's proposed way of alternatively viewing photographs thus cannot restore socio-political inequalities between the victim and the photographer, or between the victim and the spectators. The photograph has produced unequal social relations, relations that are unconsciously reinforced each time the photograph is being viewed without paying attention to these inequalities. From this perspective, we can see why it is necessary, as Prosser rightly points out, to 'widen the concept of atrocity' from the atrocities depicted by photography to the 'process of [atrocity] photography itself'.[28]

If part of the problematic character of this photograph can be found within the whole practice of atrocity photography, it is important not to solely zoom in on Carter's specific photograph. It must be placed inside a larger frame instead. His photograph must thus not be seen as an isolated case, but as part of a larger tradition of instrumentalizing poor, African regions. Carter's photograph would not be so effective in evoking feelings of pity for the struggling girl had it not employed prior stereotypes of vulnerability. Strong symbols such as the 'female', 'the child', and 'the black, naked body' are all visible in

the photograph and all contribute to transform a young African into a representative image for African despair. The long-standing use of mostly Western stereotypes of 'poor' Africa serves to justify and bolster the inequalities between the world of the spectator and the photographed. As David Campbell clarifies: '[B]ecause these tropes have a long colonial history, stereotypical photographs embody colonial relations of power that contrast an adult and superior global North with an infantilized and inferior global South'.[29]

In their depictions of famine, photographers perfectly adopt the conventions of portraying African food crises.[30] As the 2003 cover of the *New York Times Magazine* aptly illustrates, the depiction of famine has remained largely static across time and space (fig. 2). The cover shows a montage of 36 black-and-white famine photographs, taken in different African countries between 1968 and 2003, all depicting close-ups of lone children or women with particular emphasis on their famished black bodies, photographed in deserted, depoliticized contexts. The use of this montage to illustrate the article 'Why Famine Persists' suggests a causal connection between repeat famines and images of poverty that reproduce cultural and racial stereotypes that both perpetuate and justify Africa's dependence on humanitarian help from thriving countries, a subordinate position that Carter's photograph consciously exploits.

THE UNFEASABILITY OF ATROCITY PHOTOGRAPHY

If Carter's photograph can be placed within a larger, long-standing photographic discourse that produces African, inferior victims, how justified are his critics who blame his inaction, his attention-getting schemes or his exploitative imagery? Can we blame him for doing what Western media asked him to do, that is, to grant a distant famine a human face? We can criticize Carter for the way in which he depicted the Sudanese famine, but given this topic (the famine) and his tool (a camera), what else could he have done? How does one use a single image to convey a widespread famine, that has already had so many victims, with a complicated, political history? Faced with the difficulties of representing atrocities like famine, we are confronted with the limits of photography, a machinery that cannot do anything, but represent; a practice that cannot go beyond representation. Therefore, no matter how one photographs the Sudanese famine, the single image will always, in some way or another, take something away from the intensity, scope, and complexity of the very atrocities that cause their photographed victims to suffer. In a situation where an atrocity is of such a character that it can never be adequately represented, our desire to represent and our call for representation activates the very atrocity we pretend to vilify, ensuring inaction and thus continuing the atrocity. In the case of Carter's photograph we can agree with Jean-François Lyotard's argument that: 'the "perfect crime" does not consist in killing the victim or the witnesses [...] but rather in obtaining the silence

of the witnesses, the deafness of the judges, and the inconsistency (insanity) of the testimony.'[31] In other words, it is the attempt to gain control over the Sudanese famine, to master the atrocity by fitting it into existing frameworks of representation that escalates victims of atrocity, such as the girl in Carter's photograph, and thus constitutes a huge deficiency in the practice of atrocity photography.

If representation itself is an important part of the problem of atrocity photography, then Azoulay's approached way of looking at photographs, focused as it is on the social encounters surrounding the photograph, which the representation leaves out of view, is limited to a high degree. As we have seen with Carter's photograph, a focus on the encounter that took place before the camera changed what we saw in the photograph, but brought greater attention to a lesser 'atrocity': that is, Carter's decision to take the photograph, rather than the stereotypes he deployed to misrepresent the famine's political aims. With their focus on the encounter between Carter and the girl, which led to their condemnation of Carter, spectators hardly acted as judges who could repair the injustices done to her, let alone restore her rights, as Azoulay claims 'citizens of photography' do. On the contrary, because the problem with this photography lies primarily in its representation, every time spectators look at it without questioning its representational schemes, they are equally responsible for perpetuating the atrocity. That does not mean that we should not contribute any power to the spectators, to the citizens of photography. Azoulay is right in arguing that as long as photographs are viewed, they can acquire new meanings. However, so long as an atrocity photograph only calls attention to the 'event of photography', the atrocity photograph overwhelms both the atrocity and the broader practice of atrocity photography of which it forms a small part. Atrocity photographs' supposedly 'reparative spectatorship' reconfirms the unequal power structures that the photograph depicts, rather than abolishes them. Carter's photograph remains a strong image, but it is also a horrible, appealing photograph that either requests and receives attention or stirs a debate about unbearable situations in Africa. But before a critical focus on the photographic representation itself is included in the spectatorship of Carter's photograph, maybe the best way to do any justice to Carter's 'struggling girl'—to the photographed atrocity and to the atrocity of photography—is contradictorily to not show or look at Carter's photograph at all.

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NOTES

1. Prosser 2012, 10.

2. Stamets 1994.

3. I want to make clear beforehand that I do not easily agree with the reaction of most spectators who blamed Carter for taking

the photograph instead of helping the girl, a reaction that undermines the complexity of the situation. It is too easy to moralize Carter's decision at that time to not help the girl and see this as a failure of Carter to act humanely. These spectators do not take into account the fact that Carter was in Sudan as a photographer who tries to bring the food problem in Sudan to the attention by visualizing the problem in photographs, and not as an aid worker. Nevertheless, since this 'naïve' response has been so widespread, and especially because it fits the 'ideal spectatorship' that the scholar Ariella Azoulay argues for, and which this article criticizes, I believe that the popular response has to be taken seriously. For more nuanced and complex academic responses to Carter's act of taking the photograph see for example Kleinman and Kleinman 1997.

4. van Gerwen Ms, 177-178.
5. Azoulay 2005, 43 and Azoulay 2008, 121
6. Azoulay 2008, 121.
7. Azoulay 2008, 113. In her work, Azoulay also includes the camera as a participant of the event of photography. However, since her theory is exclusively focused on the social relations between the participants of photography and does not attribute a significant role to the camera (and the resulting photographs) and to the practices of which the camera forms a part, I did not name the camera itself as a participant of the event of photography, in order to reiterate the camera's passive role in Azoulay's theories.
8. Azoulay 2008, 81.
9. Reinhardt 2007, 13.
10. Although this paper focuses on reprints of Carter's photograph in popular media, this photograph has circulated in other contexts. Most importantly, scholarly discussions often point to this photograph as the perfect vehicle for discussing morality and photography. Although I do not analyze this more nuanced discussion here, given this paper's limited scope, I have noticed that moral discussions concerning Carter's photograph focus primarily on the behaviour of the photographer and the spectators, though not the morality of representation itself.

11. Lorch 1993.
12. Murphy 1993.
13. Lorch 1993.
14. Editor 1993.
15. Zelizer 2010, 168
16. MacLeod 1994, 71
17. Stamets 1994.
18. Keller 1994.
19. *The Death of Kevin Carter: Casualty of the Bang Bang Club.* Dir. Dan Krauss, 2004.
20. Krauss, 2004.
21. Prosser 2012, 10.
22. Pollock 2012, 74.
23. Campbell 2012, 83.
24. Cohen 2001, 178.
25. Hariman and Lucaites 2007, 89.
26. Mitchell 1994, 288.
27. Of course the question what happens to the individuality of the girl after the photograph is taken, is not the only question we have to ask ourselves as viewers. We cannot disapprove a photograph solely based on the fact that the girl is not represented as herself, but in the construction of the individuated aggregate stands for something bigger: a construction that we can find in almost every photograph and that can oftentimes successfully bring a unnoticed problem to the attention. However, because in this article I follow the perspective on photographs of Azoulay, where we focus on the social encounters surrounding the photograph, including the encounter between the photographer and photographed girl, I think we also have to take into account the girl as a real person, and not only as photographed object that represents something else.
28. Prosser 2012, 12.
29. Campbell 2012, 84.
30. From a historical perspective it is interesting to note that the discussion Carter's photograph evoked bears striking similarities with the controversy around one of the oldest photographs of famine. William Willoughby Hooper, a British army lieutenant and amateur photographer took several pictures of famished people while stationed in Madras during a great famine of 1876-1878. When it became known that Hooper did not give any food, treatment or help to his photographed victims, he was

highly criticized in the British press for his immoral behaviour. Therefore, not only the photograph, but also the moral debate around Carter's photograph can thus be placed in a historical tradition. See: Stefoff 2008, 13.

31. Lyotard 1998, 8.

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