Images in Spite of What? Russian War and Ukrainian Images

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> "When images disappear, words and feelings also disappear."
> *Georges Didi-Huberman*[1]

In the 1930s, Jean-Paul Sartre made a distinction between an image as a thing (or representation) and an image as an act (or gesture).[2] Sartre compared three ways the same object can be accessible to consciousness: imagining, perceiving, and thinking.[3] Georges Didi-Huberman, who regularly mentions Sartre in his own writings, acknowledges that: "To speak of an image without imagination means literally to cut the image off from its activity, from its dynamics".[4] Such a distinction between the image's phenomenology (appearance), which is grasped by perception, and semiotics (meaning), accessible through thinking (and imagination), would be often discussed in the second half of the 20th century.

The Aristotelian distinction between 'substance' and 'form'[5] prompted some scholars to introduce a more intricate differentiation between the signifier and the signified in a sign. For instance, Louis Hjelmslev delineated the 'substance' and the 'form' of the signifier: in the context of a painted image, this distinction can allude to the physical attributes of the work (such as the material it is made of, like paper, paint, or digital elements) and its formal characteristics, such as

1 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, trans. Shane B. Lillis, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012, 84.

2 Ibid., 113.

3 Lior Levy, "Rethinking the Relationship Between Memory and Imagination in Sartre's *the Imaginary*", *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 43/2, January 2012, 143–160, here 144.

4 Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, 113.

5 Wilfrid Sellars, "I. Substance and Form in Aristotle", *The Journal of Philosophy* 54/22, 1957, 688–699, here 689.

composition and arrangement.[6] Similarly, the content of such a sign-image also possesses dual dimensions: its substance pertains to the imagination (personal) or the imaginary (social), while the form of content can be understood through concepts like iconography or discourse.

Although this text does not consistently analyse the form, content, and interpretation of war images and does not enter into a semiotic interpretation of the visible plan of images, I could not avoid thinking about the substance and form of expression and the subject (content) of this expression. The urgency of war (and dealing with personal shock) and thinkers such as Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, Sartre, and Didi-Huberman stimulated me to make a personal list of images (a small collection of visual testimonies of war[7]) that Ukrainians started to post on social media after 23 February 2022. As I scrolled through my Facebook and Instagram feeds, I noticed an increasing number of images responding to war. Images of war were entering my consciousness through perception and imagination, and they made me think. On social media, these images were not objects or physical forms that we usually perceive in galleries or museums, but rather gestures (like in Sartre's definition) that tried to bridge the distance, enter the mind, and create a situation of the presence of distress and grief.

Indeed, social media platforms have played a significant role in various aspects of the Russo–Ukrainian War. They have been used by activists to mobilise support, share news, and raise awareness about the situation on the ground. Emerson Brooking claims that people experience the war "very viscerally through social media feeds" and that the transformation of Ukraine into a nation at war was stark, which has especially resonated with audiences.[8] Moved by Didi-Huberman's insights, I have made a deliberate effort to approach these images not solely as historical evidence but as dynamic entities, active participants, and expressions that acted within the Ukrainian social imaginary. I have come to recognise that these images hold more than just a record of past events; they possess the potential

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6 Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004, 14.

7 As a university lecturer, in spring of 2022, I encouraged students to collect various testimonies of the war, which resulted in a book; see: Bohdan Shumylovych and Magdalena Zolkos (eds.), *Psychosocial and Cultural Perspectives on the War in Ukraine: Imprints and Dreamscapes*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2024. I also kept a war diary and often saved social media posts, and these observations resulted in a collection of images, some of which I discuss in this text. Diaries of war are available online at the Lviv Center for Urban History. See the project: Lviv Center for Urban History, "Two Months of War: Diaries and Ego-documents", https://uma.lvivcenter.org/en/collections/178/interviews [accessed: 15.06.2024].

8 Megan Specia, "'Like a Weapon': Ukrainians Use Social Media to Stir Resistance", *The New York Times*, 25 March 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/25/world/europe/ukraine-war-social-media.html?smid=url-share [accessed: 15.06.2024].

to play various roles: from powerful agents that engage with the world to thought-provoking gestures. These images transcend their role as static representations of history; instead, they become meaningful contributors to the evolving collective consciousness. Embracing this perspective, I firmly believe that images of war have the power to evoke emotions (the plane of perception) and spark dialogue (the plane of thinking), and their influence extends beyond the immediate moment of their creation, entering the collective imaginary.

Over ten years ago, Didi-Huberman delved into four photographs captured in Auschwitz-Birkenau, investigating the complexities surrounding the representation and comprehension of historical trauma through images. He meticulously explored the ethical and aesthetic considerations tied to employing images as symbols for the unfathomable horrors of the Holocaust, and he questioned the ability of images to fully convey the depth of suffering and trauma endured by the victims. However, while reflecting on our understanding of the past, he astutely observed that to know honestly, we must also engage our capacity for imagination: "In order to know, we must imagine as well".[9] Seeing the image requires recognition, and here Didi-Huberman makes a distinction between "a certain knowledge of what is represented and an uncertain recognition of what is seen".[10] Knowledge refers to understanding or awareness of what is being represented, while recognition implies a more uncertain or subjective process of perceiving and acknowledging what is seen. It suggests that there may be a gap between what we intellectually know about a representation and the emotional or intuitive recognition of what is depicted.[11]

This dilemma between knowledge (awareness) and recognition (understanding) was behind my selection of images of rape that appeared on my Facebook feed in the spring of 2022. I was haunted by these images and often recalled Didi-Huberman's idea[12] that what we see can become what sees us – as if these images were gazing at me, even if I was not looking at them.[13] I sensed that these images were symptomatic, visually representing a horrifying reality that was difficult for me to grasp. I felt compelled to understand or recognise what these images conveyed, since they

9 Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, 84.

10 Ibid., 86.

11 Some visual testimonies of the crimes of the Russian war against Ukraine gained international recognition in 2024, becoming an important part of the collective imaginary. See: Abbey Fenbert, "'20 Days in Mariupol' Wins Oscar for Best Documentary", *The Kyiv Independent*, 11 March 2024, https://kyivindependent.com/mariupol-draft/ [accessed: 01.06.2024].

12 Kathia Hanza, "Images and Symptoms: Georges Didi-Huberman's Studies on Art", *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 45/1–2, 2014, 38–48, here 42.

13 Here, it is important to also mention W. J. T. Mitchell's agency of images, see: W. J. T. Mitchell, "What Do Pictures 'Really' Want?", *October* 77, 1996, 71–82.

are semiotic entities situated between a historical event and a signifying structure,[14] resulting in ambiguity. Although I accepted that hermeneutic deciphering of such images might prove futile, I still felt driven to attempt to understand if my beholding of images has characteristics of presence.[15] Their symbolic nature presented a challenge, and I wanted to engage with them in hopes of gaining a deeper understanding.

In my endeavour to write about images of rape, I found myself grappling with the distinction between the 'unimaginable' and the 'unrepresentable'. The unimaginable pertains to events or experiences that lie beyond our comprehension or ability to conceive, often due to their extreme or traumatic nature, much like the Holocaust. On the other hand, the unrepresentable implies that these unimaginable experiences cannot be adequately captured or conveyed through conventional means of representation, such as language or imagery. It suggests a limitation in our ability to express or fully understand certain aspects of traumatic events. I am not comparing images of the Russo–Ukrainian War and images of the Holocaust analysed by Didi-Huberman, which were produced 'in spite of all'. But if images of rape are not made 'in spite of all', if they are not acts (Sartre's gestures) of resistance against the real, what are they? Images in spite of what? In my further deliberations, I suggest that these are images that defy death – they are made in spite of death and oblivion – and, in this regard, they constitute human acts of resistance, gestures of remembrance, and commemoration of the committed violence.

On 2 March 2022, right after the battle of Kyiv started, artist Kateryna Lysovenko, who had to stay in a shelter with her two children, wrote that she felt like she was "a moving cemetery".[16] This quotation is part of a short text accompanied by a sad image of a naked mother with a child in her arms, standing in the darkness of a mystical landscape where trees are interspersed with images of destroyed houses. When the battle for the capital was over and the massive atrocities of Russian soldiers, who left the town of Bucha on 31 March, were discovered,[17] many

14 Magdalena Krasińska, "The Convergence of Phenomenology and Semiotics in Georges Didi-Huberman's Aesthetics of the Symptom", *The Polish Journal of Aesthetics* 49/2, 2018, 27–40, here 29.

15 Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence*, 57.

16 @lysovenko_kateryna (Kateryna Lysovenko), "[…] I Am Now a Moving Cemetery", Instagram post, 09 March 2022, https://www.instagram.com/p/Ca4daUPNVFr/ [accessed: 15.06.2024].

17 Bethan McKernan, "Rape as a Weapon: Huge Scale of Sexual Violence Inflicted in Ukraine Emerges", *The Guardian*, 04 April 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/03/all-wars-are-like-this-used-as-a-weapon-of-war-in-ukraine [accessed: 15.06.2024]; and Viktor Ponomariov and Angelina Kariakina, "33 dni okupatsiyi Buchi: shcho vidbuvaietsia u misti pislia zvilnennia" ("33 Days of Bucha's Occupation: What's Happening in the City after Liberation"), *Suspilne* (*Society*), 05 April 2022, https://suspilne.media/224880-33-dni-okupacii-buci-so-vidbuvaetsa-u-misti-pisla-zvilnenna/ [accessed: 15.06.2024].

Ukrainian artists were shocked. Lysovenko responded to her mediated experience of wartime rapes[18] with an image that was made public on 13 April 2022, entitled *true love of a Russian soldier* (Fig. 5).[19] This image was published both on Instagram and Facebook and shows the naked body of a man making love to a human skeleton, as if a Russian man's living body penetrated a Ukrainian woman's already dead body. For me, it is one of the most striking images (accompanied by a text) of rape I have ever seen.

Figure 5: true love of a Russian soldier

Image by Kateryna Lysovenko, acrylic on canvas, 13 April 2022. Image provided courtesy of Kateryna Lysovenko.

18 At that time, she had already moved to Poland with her two children and a cat, so she mainly learnt about the situation in Ukraine from the news and social media.

19 @lysovenko_kateryna (Kateryna Lysovenko), *true love of a Russian soldier*, Instagram post, 13 April 2022, https://www.instagram.com/p/CcSzU3ANnT7/ [accessed: 15.06.2024].

As a displaced mother experiencing the war through media channels, Lysovenko felt compelled to speak out, particularly when addressing the sensitive and critical issue of rape. Immediately following the full-scale invasion, Lysovenko became actively engaged in posting anti-war images, including the series titled *They can repeat*.[20] In this series, she responded to a slogan used in Russian propaganda, *mozhem povtorit* (we can repeat), which constantly emphasised the Russian army's capability to 'repeat' the actions of the Soviet army.[21] Lysovenko employed the same image depicting a violated woman alongside a child with the caption: "A raped and murdered woman, and her murdered child". However, she cleverly modified the captions to read "in Ukraine 2022", "in Ukraine 2014", "in Georgia 2008", and "in Chechnya 1994–1996".[22] The underlying message conveyed that throughout these incidents all the Russians had 'repeated' were acts of killing and raping innocent civilians.

In May 2022, Lysovenko created another image titled *These boys*,[23] featuring naked men (boys?) with erect and bloodied penises. Whether by titling the images, adding explanations, or playing with individual words (such as boys/men), Lysovenko tries to expand the form and substance of her depictions of violence; she extends and, at the same time, narrows the possible connotations. Adding further meaning through specific language use and contextual framing, personal or artistic visual expressions, like those in public media, have the power to either amplify or downplay the conveyed horror via titling or commentary.[24] By modifying the form of Hjelmslev's signifier, Lysovenko expands its substance, and this results in more ambiguous content for the images.[25]

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20 @lysovenko_kateryna (Kateryna Lysovenko), *They can repeat*, Instagram post, 30 March 2022, https://www.instagram.com/p/CbvcoD2NaA3/?img_index=1 [accessed: 15.06.2024].

21 In official Russian discourse, the phrase "we can do it again" implies a warning and the ability to defeat the enemy (as in the case of the Soviet war against German Nazism), but in the popular field of memes and social media, this expression refers to the notion of Russian power and imperial dominance, including domination over neighbours or conquered peoples.

22 @lysovenko_kateryna, *They can repeat*.

23 @lysovenko_kateryna (Kateryna Lysovenko), *These boys*, Instagram post, 20 May 2022, https://www.instagram.com/p/Cdxk_UuNx6k/ [accessed: 15.06.2024].

24 See similar arguments in: Tal Morse, "Shooting the Dead: Images of Death, Inclusion and Exclusion in the Israeli Press", in: Michele Aaron (ed.), *Envisaging Death: Visual Culture and Dying*, Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013, 140–156, here 144.

25 Louis Hjelmslev distinguished between the 'substance' (watercolour) and 'form' (visual arrangement of elements) of the signifier (here, an image of rape), and the 'substance' (a personal imagination or social imaginary) and 'form' (iconography or discourse of violence) of the signified. When I say that by 'modifying the form' of the signifier the author 'expands the substance' of the signified, I mean that the text–image relations in the form of expression create opportunities to broaden the content field of the analysed images.

Figure 6: rape

Image by Vlada Ralko from the series *Lviv Diary*, watercolour, ballpoint pen, and marker on paper, 29.7 cm x 21 cm, 4 April 2022. Image provided courtesy of Vlada Ralko.

Another female artist, Vlada Ralko, who had to flee Kyiv – escaping from the war – and briefly settled in Lviv, in western Ukraine, presented a similar mediated experience of war. After Bucha's atrocities became widely known, on 4 April, she published on Facebook a drawing titled *rape* (Figs. 6 and 7), which was part of a series that Ralko calls *Lviv Diary* (using the hashtag #львівськийщоденник).[26] The picture has two dominant colours, red and black, and shows a fragment of the human body

26 Vlada Ralko (Facebook profile), *Gvalt* (*Rape*), Facebook post, 04 April 2022, https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=4725916647536323&set=pcb.4725917910869530 [accessed: 15.06.2024].

– namely, the legs – which seems to be torn off from the body and turned upside down. Ralko would repeat this iconography later, in May 2022, but the image still has an inscribed title, the striking word 'rape', which floats on the upper side of a drawing (Fig. 7).[27] Many Ukrainian artists in the spring of 2022 made drawings or paintings depicting human bodies, whole or dismembered. In early May 2022, art critic Kateryna Botanova wrote that "bodies, shapeless ones looking more like outlines or abstract figurines or more definitively feminine, are one of the main symbols in the imagery of this war".[28]

On 14 April, just a day after Lysovenko posted her watercolour of rape on social media, a male artist from Lviv, Danylo Movchan, posted on Facebook a watercolour called *RUSSIAN RAPES UKRAINIAN WOMAN* (Fig. 8).[29] Even though the title strongly connotes human violence, the image shows a less ferocious representation. The work displays two bodies, one in pink (a sign of life) and the other in dark blue (a symbol of death),[30] which practically do not touch each other. The man, who does not even look at his victim, touches the female body with his hand, and the main sign of rape is an erection, although the penis is pointing in the opposite direction from the female body. The scene shows a rape in which even an undesirable touch provokes suffering and infects the female body with the poison of death and sorrow. Movchan's image follows the visual conventions of religious icon painting, where figures are calm, as if eternal and solemn. But visuals are not enough for the author; he compensates for the lack of dramatic expression in visuals by indicating the brutality of the depicted scene through the title in capital letters.

Image–text relations are crucial for all works considered above. For Lysovenko, inscribed texts and titles are not denotative but rather expand possible interpretations. Ralko, as she shared in an interview with me, contemplates her visual diary as a sort of 'writing', a language that is rooted (in her perception) in the philosophy of the Cynics (*kynikos*), where a question may seem like an accusation or a provocation but not the explanation.[31] She is interested in bringing meaning to words, opposing poisonous imitative language in which lies can cover crimes. Therefore, she rarely uses sentences but rather single words, which themselves work as signifiers. If Movchan poses his verbal statements as a dialogue with the other (the viewer) or

27 Vlada Ralko (Facebook profile), *Gvalt* (*Rape*), Facebook post, 19 May, 2022, https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=4844417622352891&set=a.177678712360162 [accessed: 15.06.2024].

28 Kateryna Botanova, "Defined by Silence", *Eurozine*, 06 May 2022, https://www.eurozine.com/defined-by-silence/ [accessed: 15.06.2024].

29 Danylo Movchan (Facebook profile), *ROSIIANYN GVALTUIE UKRAINSKU ZHINKU* (*RUSSIAN RAPES UKRAINIAN WOMAN*), Facebook post, 14 April 2022, https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=7975843979108119&set=pb.100000477875902.-2207520000. [accessed: 15.06.2024].

30 Danylo Movchan, interview with the author, in person, 29 November 2022.

31 Vlada Ralko, interview with the author, in person, 29 November 2022.

explains what is visible and condemns the enemy with his words, Ralko practises philosophical questioning of the self. She states that her work as an artist is a comprehension and contemplation of her choice, which seems to be a closed dialogue with herself. This choice "is based on such a dialogue, where the question of principles requires an answer of responsibility", while questioning and responsibility in an extended visual cycle become a continuity, a constant action.[32]

Figure 7: rape

Image by Vlada Ralko from the series *Lviv Diary*, watercolour, ballpoint pen, and marker on paper, 29.7 cm x 21 cm, 4 April 2022. Image provided courtesy of Vlada Ralko.

32 Ralko, interview.

Figure 8: RUSSIAN RAPES UKRAINIAN WOMAN

Image by Danylo Movchan, watercolour on paper, 40 cm x 35 cm, 14 April 2022. Image provided courtesy of Danylo Movchan.

Many more images of violence against women were produced by Ukrainian artists in the first months of the war, and they circulated publicly. Specific images depict more typical scenes of violence, wherein women are bound and encircled by military men.[33] For instance, Lina Chanturiia portrayed a woman with her hands

33 @iamkinderalbum (Album Kinder), *Russian soldiers rape women in Ukrainian cities*, Instagram post, 25 March 2022, https://www.instagram.com/p/Ca9MUMPN_mb/ [accessed: 15.06.2024].

tied, drawing attention to her genitals covered in red paint while other parts of her body or face are largely concealed.[34] This image presents a depiction of a vulnerable (and generalised) naked female who appears to be in distress and unable to protect herself as her hands are tied. On the other hand, some images take a more abstract approach, aiming to explore and portray the experience of rape in a less 'conventional' manner, seeking to visualise the pain it inflicts.

The images of war and violence against civilians are hardly imitative or mimetic in nature, and although we know what is shown, the image functions more as a gesture that refers to broader meanings. Authors want to comprehend the violence; they aspire to communicate these acts through visual expressions, as if filling the gap between knowing and understanding. As forms of symbolic resistance, the images of rape function as 'egodocuments' (for instance, diaries), and, at the same time, they aim to oppose rapists' imaginations. The rape of women and men by Russian soldiers is seen as a threat to society as a whole, and, in this way, the uncomfortable and disturbing images of rape help bring the community together through the condemnation of the enemy.

As many academic studies[35] and media reports[36] show, rape as a weapon is as old as war itself. Among the possible objectives of a rapist is to "humiliate and degrade, to break the spirit of defenders, to shatter families and communities, to instil a sense of hopelessness and despair".[37] Among the things that distinguish rapes in wartime from those that take place in peacetime is their imaginary dimension. Scholars explain peacetime rape as a dichotomy between the (psychosocial) fantasies of the rapist and the social stigmatisation of the victim, which is expressed in terms of social ethics.[38] War greatly extends the space for imagining rape because it becomes a part of specific violent scenarios, including an instrument of genocide.[39]

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34 Lina Chanturiia (Facebook profile), "'Bil' z serii 'Viina'" ("'Pain' from the series 'War'"), Facebook post, 07 April 2022, https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=4789947727797993&set=a.1407701596022640 [accessed: 15.06.2024].

35 Marta Havryshko, "Zbroia viiny: seksualne nasylstvo rosiyskykh viyskovykh v Ukrayini" ("Weapons of War: Sexual Violence by the Russian Military in Ukraine"), *Commons*, 27 February 2023, https://commons.com.ua/uk/seksualne-nasilstvo-rosijskih-vijskovih-v-ukrayinu/ [accessed: 15.06.2024].

36 McKernan, "Rape as a Weapon".

37 Laura King, "Russia's 'Most Hidden Crime' in Ukraine War: Rape of Women, Girls, Men and Boys", *Los Angeles Times*, 21 August 2022, https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2022-08-21/russias-most-hidden-crime-in-ukraine-war-rape [accessed: 15.06.2024].

38 Raphaëlle Branche et al., "Writing the History of Rape in Wartime", in: Raphaëlle Branche and Fabrice Virgili (eds.), *Rape in Wartime*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, 1–16, here 9.

39 Doris E. Buss, "Rethinking 'Rape as a Weapon of War'", *Feminist Legal Studies* 17/2, 2009, 145–163, here 147; and Nicola Henry, Tony Ward, and Matt Hirshberg, "A Multifactorial Model of Wartime Rape", *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 9/5, 2004, 535–562.

For instance, research suggests that deindividuation, which causes the lack of empathy for victims, is more influential when people are in uniform (armed and uniformed rapists), and the diffusion of responsibility increases when a rapist has a group identification, like in the military.[40] Militarism, a characteristic arrogance among aggressors, shapes attitudes, norms, and beliefs often conducive to sexual aggression.

Ukrainian officials believe that the Russian promotion of terrorism against civilians was sanctioned at the highest levels because rape is among the instruments of subjugation and domination.[41] The Russian president publicly used the infamous quote "Like it or not, my beauty, you have to put up with it", which comes from Russian popular culture and men's (prison) 'jokes' about rape.[42] This act was a public threat to Ukraine, and the fear of rape provided an extended symbolic and even a metaphorical register for talking about domination. Putin often frames his machismo[43] and militarism with rape-culture discourses.[44] In such a discourse, to loot and 'rape' a country in its incarnation as a woman or man is close to the "symbolic soiling of the nation", the act of dominance.[45]

Pictures of violence, especially posted on social media or on personal blogs, played a vital role in common mobilisation for war (especially in 2022), crystallising the fear of the enemy and serving to reveal its ruthless cruelty. Images of sexual violence became metaphors for invasion and occupation; they called for fighting and resistance. They were predominantly not conceived as acts of aesthetic expression because, in the first phase of the war, the shock was stronger than art. During the war's first two months, many people in Ukraine were stunned and attuned to the media, searching for information and avoiding everything that could distract them from reality. One artist commented in April 2022 that even if people were not suffering bombardment or occupation, they still experienced the war: "Almost all

40 Henry, Ward, and Hirshberg, "A Multifactorial Model of Wartime Rape", 551.

41 King, "Russia's 'Most Hidden Crime' in Ukraine War".

42 Chris Jewers, "Putin Accused of Making Rape Joke about Ukraine during Conference with Macron amid Invasion Fears", *Daily Mail Online*, 08 February 2022, https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10490623/Putin-accused-making-rape-joke-Ukraine-calling-country-beauty.html [accessed: 14.06.2024].

43 Marko Dumančić, "Putin-Era Machismo and Anti-Feminism in Historical Perspective", *Jordan Center for the Advanced Study of Russia Blog*, 20 October 2021, https://jordanrussiacenter.org/news/putin-era-machismo-and-anti-feminism-in-historical-perspective/ [accessed: 14.06.2024].

44 Nathan Hodge, "Putin's Use of Crude Language Reveals a Lot about His Worldview", *CNN*, 08 February 2022, https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/08/europe/putin-coarse-remarks-ukraine-intl/index.html [accessed: 15.06.2024]; and Tom Parfitt, "Putin Praises Sexual Prowess of Israeli President", *The Guardian*, 20 October 2006, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/oct/20/russia.tomparfitt [accessed: 14.06.2024].

45 Branche and Virgili, *Rape in Wartime*, 108.

emotions are militarized, almost everything that is not about war does not arouse interest or empathy".[46] People who stayed in Ukraine during the war and those who escaped felt constant tension. Periods of concentration and mobilisation were followed by phases of decline and exhaustion, and, for many, the only way to work and live 'normally' meant moving somewhere. As the artist Olia Fedorova claims, one cannot persistently be a fighter or a warrior: "You need to regain your vulnerability, your ability to feel something".[47]

Alla Petrenko-Lysak, Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology at the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, asserts that she could not watch films in late February and March 2022. She admits that listening to music or watching movies in the first month of war was impossible since her consciousness was continuously on alert: "I needed to listen to what is around me so I would not miss the alarm sound behind my apartment window".[48] Immersing herself in watching movies or reading a book could distract her from reality, and she could return to usual cultural practices only in April 2022. Olha Yaskevych, a psychotherapist and an Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology at the Ukrainian Catholic University, comments that it is normal for a person to be fixated on reality when external forces endanger their ego or self. If one is set in the current situation, it gives the illusion of control. Reading a book or watching a film in a time of danger may take a person into an imaginary reality with scattered attention, which is perceived (almost on the level of corporeality) as unsafe and may even cause nausea.[49]

The fear of losing connection to reality and the need to be in the here and now explains why social media was crucial for many artists in the first months of the war. The flow of social media allowed artists to produce public visual or textual diaries instead of complex artworks. Botanova, who made a short overview of artistic practices in the spring of 2022, acknowledged that many artworks were "mostly meant as notes to oneself, semi-public diaries available on social media, a regular exercise in seeing and feeling without a chance to escape".[50] Certainly, numerous artists have created images akin to diaries and snapshots of historical moments, crafting visual records and messages as responses to media reality or to preserve the memory of significant war events.

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46 Ivan Chernickin, "'It's a Dream Now – Just to See Each Other, Just to Live'. Ukrainian Artists Show Their Art Depicting the War", *Zaborona*, 28 April 2022, https://zaborona.com/en/ukrainian-artists-show-their-art-depicting-the-war/ [accessed: 14.06.2024].

47 Olia Fedorova, Dana Kavelina, and Monika Fabijanska, "Two Ukrainian artists talk about making art during wartime, the importance of vulnerability, and who writes history", *Bomb*, 15 September 2022, https://bombmagazine.org/articles/olia-fedorova-and-dana-kavelina/ [accessed: 14.06.2024].

48 Alla Petrenko-Lysak, interview with the author, in person, 18 January 2023.

49 Olha Yaskevych, interview with the author, in person, 18 January 2023.

50 Botanova, "Defined by Silence".

For historians, such records and notes are called egodocuments, referring to autobiographical writing, such as memoirs, diaries, letters, and travel accounts. The term was coined around 1955 by Jacques Presser, who defined egodocuments as writing in which the 'I' is continuously present in the text.[51] According to Presser, egodocuments have an open border with art,[52] so it is difficult to establish the limits of the term since everything could become an egodocument. Artists document their own lives, thoughts, feelings, and identities, providing viewers with insights into their inner worlds. Just like traditional egodocuments such as diaries or autobiographies, visual works capture moments in a person's life, serving as a form of self-expression and self-representation. The above-mentioned visual works document historical events, war, and violence, offering valuable insights into the period and context in which they were created.

Some historians would ask, however, to what extent egodocuments, consciously or unconsciously, differ from actual deeds and thoughts. How reliable is human memory or imagination, and how trustworthy are the authors? Presser alleges egodocuments represent feelings and emotions connected to specific events: "They are conditions of vision, and spirit can see nothing not focused in some living eye".[53] Thus, the person's memory or artist's imagination can never create a replication of the past or a fair registration of life since we know that people shape a fictive 'I' and, from that personality, they assess life experiences, especially if these experiences are heavily mediated. The blurred boundary between the historical egodocument and fiction is essential in my argument, since a work of art could be treated as a form of imagination or creativity and, at the same time, as a diary and eyewitness of history. Posted on social media, images of war rape were acts of resistance and egodocuments – gestures and testimonies at the same time.

Discussing the specificity of egodocuments, Presser observed that fictionalising in the visual document is no crime since truth is essential (objective documentation), while truthfulness (imagination) is no less. Egodocuments are inherently subjective, offering a personal perspective on events and experiences. They serve as a bridge between the individual's inner world and the external reality they navigate. In this context, truth refers to the accurate depiction of events, dates, and facts, whereas truthfulness relates to the authenticity of the personal experience, emotions, and insights conveyed by the author. Images of war, like dreams, are important because they function as a reflection of real life; they include the conscious experience of life. Mediatised instances of violence and rapes of Ukrainian civilians, perpetrated

51 Arianne Baggerman and Rudolf Dekker, "Jacques Presser, Egodocuments and the Personal Turn in Historiography", *The European Journal of Life Writing* 7, 2018, 90–110, here 90.

52 For instance, he gave examples of music, such as Bedřich Smetana's string quartet "From My Life" (1876) or Leoš Janáček's "Intimate Letters" (1928).

53 Baggerman and Dekker, "Jacques Presser, Egodocuments", 96.

by Russian soldiers in the spring of 2022, caused not only public outrage. One of my students, Siania K., recorded in her diary a dream that took place when images of war were posted on social media networks and newspapers or magazines were reporting massive instances of rapes of civilians:

> In my dream, we came to my grandma to celebrate Easter in Kolomyia. We invited some guests. But they called and said they would not come. Because the police were driving around the city looking for rape victims, raped by Russian soldiers. I was one of the victims. My mother told me that I had experienced violence and must inform the police. She said this in her regular voice. The day was very sunny.[54]

Another student, Liuda B., recalled that she saw in her dream a big supermarket in her hometown occupied by Russians, with a big sign: "Rape is allowed".[55] Such instances of rape appearing in the dreams of Ukrainians were probably caused by the media and the spread of information. But in both cases, visual expressions posted on Facebook and narrated or recorded dreams can be treated as egodocuments of war. Reinhard Koselleck, while arguing that such egodocuments are recorded dreams, stated that historical reality takes its place from the split of two fundamental dimensions. The present is stored in the 'space of experience', both conscious and unconscious. Still, reality also intersects with a 'horizon of expectation', something that has not yet been experienced but which we can feel or desire.[56] Koselleck argued that fiction or art is about possible and viable eventualities that control the imaginary. In this sense, aesthetic experience is like a dream, influencing us even if we cannot clearly define it.

An image (in the form of a painting or drawing) holds a social dimension – it is shared, received, and interpreted in a particular manner. Its perception is intertwined with awareness and observation. Conversely, a dreamt image does not seek to be understood. Dreaming entails a sense of isolation, which, consequently, grants the dreamer a powerful gaze. Didi-Huberman stresses that paintings (or other fictional images) are, of course, not dreams: "We see them with open eyes, but this may be what hinders us and makes us miss something in them".[57] The value of images produced as egodocuments is that, like diaries, interviews, audio recordings, video testimonies, movies, or books, they are the source of the history unfolding before our eyes. Robert Harvey indicates that "seeing clearly and effectively into the eye of

54 Siania K., Diary, Lviv Center for Urban History, 19 April 2022, Lviv, Ukraine [author's trans.].

55 Liuda B., Diary, Lviv Center for Urban History, 17 November 2023, Lviv, Ukraine [author's trans.].

56 Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004, 255.

57 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*, trans. John Goodman, University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2005, 156.

history requires far more participation than just that of the direct witnesses",[58] because when artists find themselves amid war, whether near the battlefield or in exile, they encounter the initial moment of the Kantian sublime, evoked by the imminent threat to life.[59] Ralko, who often calls her visual war series 'diaries', did intend to make art in the early phases of war; she was searching for a sign of life in solitude:

> I started my so-called diary series when I encountered something that completely turned my idea of certain things upside down or threw me into a space where I was alone. It's when the obviousness of familiar places or common meanings leaves you, and you seem to have to move without landmarks in a minefield.[60]

The horror of war generates silence; it causes mutism and an inability to find words, so one needs to reinvent the meaning of words, which is lost to horrifying reality. Transparent language[61] cannot represent the silence, the absence, which requires muteness. However, the image has the power to represent nothingness since it is nothing by nature; its fundamental function is to present something that is absent. According to Sartre, imagination is the epitome of human freedom since it allows consciousness to detach itself from experience and negate reality.[62] Speech and the text written on the image (as in the above-mentioned cases) obviously have different functions, and we can assume that although many artists experienced mutism at the beginning of the war, they could express the invisible (and unspeakable) through the combination of words and images. This allowed the use of indexical and iconic signification (image) together with the denotative power of words.

We can accept that fictional images by Ukrainian artists posted on social media in the early phase of the military invasion constituted a nonverbal experience (imagination) combined with (visual) words, being more an expression or a gesture, or as Ralko affirms: "A series of many drawings became a chance for me to overcome numbness".[63] Even though she managed to escape from her native city of Kyiv to a safer location, she still felt humiliated. Humiliation is a coercive state of immobility (as if someone binds your body), which induces irrational thoughts and renders one

58 Robert Harvey, "Eyes Wide Open: What the Eye of History Compels Us to Do", *Angelaki* 23/4, 2018, 91–102, here 92; See also: Stijn De Cauwer and Laura Katherine Smith (eds.), *Critical Image Configurations: The Work of Georges Didi-Huberman*, London: Routledge, 2021.

59 The idea of sublime combines both fear and beauty. See: Terrence Des Pres, "Terror and the Sublime", *Human Rights Quarterly* 5/2, 1983, 135–146; and Thomas Huhn, "The Kantian Sublime and the Nostalgia for Violence", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 53/3, 1995, 269–275.

60 Ralko, interview.

61 Here, I refer to neutral language, which supposedly can describe reality, and Vlada Ralko doubts that words could precisely describe what was happening and what she observed.

62 Levy, "Rethinking the Relationship", 143.

63 Ralko, interview.

speechless or numb.[64] Humiliated by the war, Ukrainian artists, for a specific moment, could not look into 'the eye of history'[65]; they could only imagine, and what they imagined was humiliation.

Images of rape posted in the early spring of 2022 represent stories and events of violence that had not yet been culturally processed or could not be fully identified at that time. The media's role in disseminating these images brought immediate visibility to the atrocities, yet also highlighted the challenges of contextualising and processing such raw trauma. The Italian novelist Italo Calvino stressed once that media transforms the world into images:

> These are images stripped of the inner inevitability that ought to mark every image as form and as meaning, as a claim on the attention and as a source of possible meanings. Much of this cloud of visual images fades at once, like the dreams that leave no trace in the memory, but what does not fade is a feeling of alienation and discomfort.[66]

But, at the same time, these fictional images of rape and violence are different from 'media images'; they ought not to fade. Images of rape constitute mediated and, nevertheless, actual, embodied experiences of war, and they need to persist – at least in culture and memory.

For many, war violence became present and known due to media, often integrated by the persons' bodies and expressed through images or dreams. The bodies of image makers and the bodies of viewers also became sites of trauma. The visceral nature of visual representation evokes a bodily response, highlighting the physical and emotional toll of the violence. Dreams and artistic expressions that incorporate these traumatic images can serve as symbolic representations of underlying fear, pain, and confusion. These forms of expression can be therapeutic, offering a way to process and make sense of the trauma.

While traumatic historical experience requires the production of meaning, language, and a narrative to explain and assuage it, aesthetic experience deals with the discomfort that no description (at least not one that conforms to conventional models) can represent or atone for the trauma. Ralko clarifies: "It's even hard for me to recognise this image-making as a practice because, in such periods, it seems that I can't do anything, I don't know anything, and I'm doing something that no one needs but me [. . .] but at least I'm talking".[67] Here 'talking' does not mean explaining, but

64 Harvey, "Eyes Wide Open", 98.

65 Georges Didi–Huberman, *The Eye of History: When Images Take Positions*, trans. Shane B. Lillis, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2018.

66 Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, trans. Patrick Creagh, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988, 57.

67 Ralko, interview.

rather visual parlance, utterance, expression – it does not lead to an understanding of reality but a recognition of its horrors. Some things, like wartime violence, cannot be seen, and what cannot be seen should be shown (or turned into fiction) to provoke thinking. The very notion of the artistic image is inseparable from the constant attempts to show what cannot be seen. Instead of talking about rape or violence, artistic images show the veracity of the ferocity.

As humans, we may struggle to confront and comprehend a horror directly; therefore, we rely on deflected or mediated images to make sense of it and distance it from our own lives. This process involves transforming the horror into something imaginable, something that can be mediated through images and narratives. By using deflected images, whether through art, media, or other forms of representation, we create a buffer between ourselves and the raw reality of horror, allowing us to approach and engage with the subject matter from a safer emotional distance. Viewing these images becomes a way for someone to process and understand the unimaginable, as artists or image-makers attempt to bring it within the boundaries of our comprehension. Through the use of mediated images, we construct a framework that allows us to grapple with the horror of gendered violence while maintaining a certain level of psychological and emotional stability. It is a way for us to confront the unfathomable without being overwhelmed by its immediate impact.

In September 2022, Ukrainian artist Dana Kavelina wondered, in an interview with Monika Fabijanska, if it would be possible to preserve all the complexities of what is happening now (in Ukraine) on so many different levels. She was thinking about the possibility of an inclusive memorial in which countless voices would not be silenced and would not be left unheard after a war, since such overlooked voices of victims could turn into ghosts that will haunt us.[68] "[The] Russian army uses mass rape as a weapon of war right now", claims Kavelina, and contends that we will have much work to do to find a way to record histories and preserve war memories to avoid blind spots, "which are repeatedly used to manipulate the history of violence".[69]

Kavelina has worked for several years on a video installation that aims to show wartime rape in all its complexity and not just as a collateral consequence of war. She was interested in women's experiences of the Balkan Wars and, suddenly, war arrived in her country. In a 2019 drawing entitled *woman kills the son of the enemy* (from the series *Communications: Exit to the Blind Spot*), Kavelina shows a woman holding a child hung by the umbilical cord, which enters the woman's body in the form of a bloody ribbon. Another image, titled *nation (from Latin: giving birth)*, shows a machine

68 Fedorova, Kavelina, and Fabijanska, "Two Ukrainian Artists Talk about Making Art during Wartime".

69 Ibid.

gun in which a firearms cartridge looks like a man's penis; a torn red spot next to it refers to the image of a scratched vagina. These images were exhibited in 2019 at the Kmytiv Museum of Art (Ukraine), placed between monumental Soviet paintings that glorify the history of the Second World War. The artist is critical of celebrating the consequences of war as she looks at it through a gendered lens. Kavelina acknowledges that she works with archival footage to revise history and, in a way, reshape the historical facts to create the model of history as a space of imagination, a space for utopia:

> History is located in the human body [...]. History doesn't actually have truth or a set of objective facts [...] the right and the power to write history must be given to the ones who were deprived of it for thousands of years [...] and to the dead who would be resurrected and tell their history the way they would like to.[70]

Can art become a memorial or help people, proposing a remedy? Can images of war 'write history'? For Kavelina, "speaking out about the whole extent of the terror" or visualising and articulating the most nightmarish experiences is the way to heal wounds. Similarly, for Movchan, his images of war are witnesses of a harsh reality and a testimony of the war: "Art, especially in times of war, helps us to experience important events, to think about them, and even, to some extent, to convey the truth to the world [...] what I do is necessary because, thanks to my watercolours, people learn what is happening in Ukraine".[71]

Movchan considers his images of rape as visual metaphors, which can bridge someone's reality (for instance, viewers on Facebook) with the act of violence (making a quasi-experience of war reality).[72] Making images whose meanings might extend beyond the visible, he is not interested in showing the act of sexual penetration. Instead, he aims at the aesthetic generalisation of the crime. He represents the invasion of a person's private space (a male rapist is 'poisoning' a female body by touching it) as an act of ferocity, and one can see it as a metaphor for the raped country. He states: "When I show a scene of violence, I want others to see it and not to repeat it", and for him, the viewer's response is critical.[73] A friend of Movchan, the Polish poet Dariusz Pado, commented on his image of rape with the following strophe: "Rape breeds hatred; you can't scrape it away".[74] These verses indicate that a rapist pro-

70 Ibid.

71 Elena Mishchenko, "Bilder zum Krieg von Danylo Movchan" ("Pictures of the War by Danylo Movchan"), *Max Hartmann*, 15 May 2022, https://www.max-hartmann.ch/2022/05/15/bilder-zum-krieg-von-danylo-movchan/ [accessed: 14.06.2024] [author's trans].

72 Movchan, interview.

73 Ibid.

74 @daro_pa_pa (Dariusz Pado), tak się rodzi, Instagram post, 14 April 2022, https://www.instagram.com/p/CcVPvaCoxWZ/ [accessed: 29.08.2024] [author's trans.]

duces cultural abhorrence instead of achieving subjugation, and this hatred is not 'surgically' removable.

Conclusions

Besides resistance and testimony in the form of the egodocument, it is essential to look at images of humiliation produced by Ukrainian artists because they show us how one humiliated person (the artist) gazes at another humiliated person (the victim).[75] The person who acts through the imagination of violence is humiliated by war as well as by the humiliated subject they imagine. The gesture of imagination (in the form of an image) extends a humiliating look towards their compatriot, turning them into an object. To imagine rape means to look upon this violence and to see it. This objectification of violence doesn't necessarily imply a lack of empathy. The act of looking and capturing the moment itself involves a certain level of empathy, despite the shared experience of humiliation both (the artist and their imaginary subject) endure. Imagination opens the other, be it a living, dead, or humiliated person, and it 'speaks' for the other. Thus, images of rape become witnesses of violence; they depict, testify, and help look into the eye of history. Such images also make us, as viewers, witness this horrible history by the proxy of an image.

Images never give complete visibility; moreover, they can show absence through partial visibility, which is invariably what they offer us. Lysovenko is critical of both media and art: "News or art tries to cover up the war shamefully, but filming or painting of ruined bodies up close is not at all exposing, but hiding what war is, because it is nothing special, and it is unbearable".[76] Images of war are simultaneously about this 'nothing special' and something 'unbearable'. If we don't look at the war, we miss the point. By restraining the imagination to work on visual images of violence, we do not come closer to the absence of the dead. Every act of creating an image overcomes the impossibility of describing something real. Artists, in particular, refuse to bow their heads before the unimaginable and ineffable, whose devastating hypnosis they feel like anyone who has faced the destruction of people by other people.

For many artists, drawings of wartime violence were both egodocuments and aesthetic experiences that allowed them to cope with unspoken anger and pain and share it with others through social media. Photographer Yurko Diachyshyn describes this attempt to turn images into language in the following Facebook post:

75 Harvey, "Eyes Wide Open", 98.

76 Kateryna Lysovenko (Facebook profile), "V voine net nichego vozvyshennogo…" ("There is nothing sublime about war…"), Facebook post, 14 January 2023, https://www.facebook.com/cloisonnage/posts/pfbid02DbwBvxQFCimNRmWM2BWV5N6tC5MX7fasxhgcPgrdUdBgHB6rgatV484VEmfxwRqdl [accessed: 14.06.2024] [author's trans.].

> The first time I filmed a funeral for soldiers at the beginning of the war in March 2022, it was very difficult, and I told myself that I would not show such things again. The very next day, I was taking photographs of a funeral again. Because how else can we tell the world about this pain, what war and loss are, and that every killed soldier is not just a statistic but a great tragedy and wound for the family and loved ones? It's hard to think about it and look at it, but we need to keep thinking about it.[77]

Images of rape make sorrow and pain available to the senses, which means being moved emotionally and to thought. It also means to give metaphors to those without names and images, to those invisible victims whose traumatic experiences are hidden from sensibility. In the essay "On the Concept of History", Walter Benjamin wrote that nothing that has ever happened should be considered lost to history for a truthful chronicler.[78] Certainly, only the 'rescued humanity' comprehends the entirety of its history: thus, each moment a person experiences becomes a quotation (in the form of words and images). Didi-Huberman sees the main task of the chronicler (and I do hope that the described cases also refer to this figure) as talking about the unseen setting of phenomena, deeds, and places that need to be made sensible or visible. We can only hope that such 'talking' and dialogue with the help of images and words about war will shape a memorial, an inclusive 'something' that will give a voice to the unheard victims.

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