

Article

Painful Images: Ukraine 1993, 2014, and 2022

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Abstract: Ukrainian art, from the economic and political transformation of the 1990s through the events of 2014 (Crimea's annexation and war in Donbas) to the Russian Federation's full-scale invasion in 2022, has been haunted in various ways by the question of trauma and loss. At the same time, however, the problem of trauma is not just a problem of war or conflict but is somehow inscribed in post-Soviet space. Photography has a special role to play here, as a medium constantly oscillating between visible and invisible and between presence and absence. Since traumatic images transform and question the medium, a discussion about trauma becomes a discussion about the image itself. This article analyses selected projects by Ukrainian artists in various disciplines made in three chronological moments: the first half of the 1990s, after 2014, and now, in response to the ongoing war. Each project touches in different ways on the issue of trauma and the traumatic view while also touching the broader level of relationships between affects, vision, and history.

Keywords: war; trauma; Ukrainian art; Donbas; suffering; photography; afterimage; evidence; memory; vision

1. Introduction

The ongoing war in Ukraine over the past almost two years and the hundreds and perhaps thousands of images through which we look at it focus our attention on the problem of suffering and the transmission of what we might call a traumatic view. Images of wartime cruelty and destruction can have, as Peggy Phelan suggested, an immediacy that gives them the character of performative speech acts (Phelan 2012, p. 53). At the same time, "there can be a failure of seeing and understanding in the atrocity photograph" (Prosser 2012, p. 12). However, I am not interested in the immediacy of press images and photographs (and those created live by people who are literally actors in this war) but rather in artworks that are subjects to a certain latency, problematizing the very relationship between the image (especially the photographic one) and the traumatic. One of the interesting questions that emerges in this context is the following: Does one necessarily have to experience war and its atrocities with one's own eyes to be affected by trauma? And what is the function of images in this context?

Here, we touch on the complex and heterogeneous relationship between the photographic image and trauma, which, at least from Roland Barthes' book *Camera Lucida*, has been previously sketched out (Barthes 1981). As Ulrich Baer remarked in his *Spectral Evidence. The Photography of Trauma*, "this possibility that photographs capture unexperienced events creates a striking parallel between the workings of the camera and the structure of traumatic memory" (Baer 2022, p. 8). We can also say that both photography and trauma, through a series of ruptures, introduce confusion into the perception of time and space and disrupt the workings of memory.

It seems that these basic recognitions provide a fresh look at the images of war in Ukraine and Ukrainian art of recent decades, confronting the problem of unnamed imperial violence, permanent anxiety, literal and metaphorical homelessness, and the question of loss. In this article, therefore, I will not limit myself to an analysis of visual material from 2022 and 2023 but want to consider the problem in a broader perspective instead. First, it is important to look at war in the long term as an inexorable condition with which Ukrainian



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society has been confronted since 2014. At the same time, the problem of trauma is not just a problem of war but is somehow inscribed in the nation's post-Soviet space.

As such, I construct what follows based on a clear division in which the images and works to be examined are set in three chronological contexts. The first ("1993: Haunted Space") concerns the period of economic and systemic transformation, in which the traumatic is linked to the disintegration of Soviet time-space, nostalgia (Boym 2001; Boele et al. 2019), the uncertainty of tomorrow, the nature of capitalism then, and finally the ambiguity of defining the adjective "post-Soviet" (on this last question, see Buck-Morss 2008). The crisis of post-Soviet time-space here becomes a crisis of representation: a painful wound transforming into a traumatic view that is difficult or even impossible to remove from the field of vision, haunting it like a spectre. In this section, I discuss, by analysing the photo series by Boris Mikhailov from 1993, the complex relationships of trauma and the unrepresentable with various forms of disappearance or non-existence problematized by historiosophical reflection and by the theory of the photographic image.

In the second section ("2014: Traumatic Space"), I focus on images created by artists in response to war in the Donbas, which is ongoing since 2014. Events of 2014—the annexation of Crimea and war in the Donbas region—along with the shock and trauma that have followed are crucial for understanding contemporary Ukrainian art (Lozhkina 2020, p. 500). The post-Maidan "cultural Renaissance" centres around a question: "How do the documentary art practices of the last seven years reflect the political situation in Ukraine?" (Biedarieva 2021, p. 55). Unlike the Maidan events of late 2013 and early 2014, whose aestheticised representations recreated identity experiences of solidarity and collective energy, the images created in reaction to war in the Donbas were visibly painful. Works by artists including Yevgenia Belorusets, Nikita Kadan, Mikola Ridnyi, Alevtina Kakhidze, and Lia and Andrii Dostliev explored the visual space of individual and collective trauma. They are determined by loss of home (many residents of the Donbas region literally had to leave their homes—artists among them), disintegration of political and social space, destruction of memory, and questioning the language. In this context, I am particularly interested in how the problem of loss translates into the question of sight and theories of vision and how paths of seeing and knowing split (to follow Cathy Caruth's remark). In the work of Ridnyi and others, the eye becomes a space marked by trauma, with what is traumatic enduring like an afterimage. In the case of other artistic projects (*Occupation* by Andrii Dostliev, for example), complex relationships between loss and what survives/remains becomes a major theme (along with photography's ambivalent role in simultaneously transmitting and overcoming trauma).

The final part ("2022: Suffering Space") is focused on Ukrainian artists' new forms of work with the traumatic and on the possible ways of transmitting trauma through images. The Russian Federation's full-scale invasion has revealed new layers of suffering and new formulas for understanding it. A relational understanding of the traumatic seems crucial here, where "a multidirectional history of suffering" (Rothberg 2009) means incorporating into one's own experience the history of suffering coming from other times and other cultures and latitudes. Like other attempts to transcend trauma through photography, it shows a community of suffering and thus turns "I" into "we" and individual pain into a collective one.

The Ukrainian territory has been depicted by foreign photographers from Roger Fenton and his famous photographs portraying the Crimean War to Rafał Milach's work in Bucza and Kyiv in 2023, usually as a scene of conflict. However, I am interested not in a gaze from outside but in one that is directed inward and thus problematises the traumatic view. Although I place photography at the centre, I will not limit my analysis to it, which is in keeping with my intuition that the traumatic crosses the boundaries of the medium, "wandering" in its own way between media.

2. 1993: Haunted Space

Two years after Ukraine gained independence and less than seven years after the Chernobyl nuclear-plant disaster, Boris Mikhailov, major figure of Ukrainian art, created a series of hand-tinted, panoramic photos he called *At Dusk* (1993). It closed a series of several projects carried out from the early 1970s until the very early 1990s, in which the artist combined the problem of colour (or lack thereof) with the description of Soviet (and later: post-Soviet) space and the trauma embedded in it. In the case of the earlier *Red*, the theme is the language of visual propaganda and the (invisible) violence inscribed in it—the colour red is also something that marks the space with a pervasive oppressiveness. It signifies control over bodies, censorship, and a threat of denunciation. When we speak of the *Salt Lake* and *Unfinished Dissertation* from the 1980s, it is the record of the life of “Soviet man” in the context of the first signs of the disintegration of the empire and the omnipresent (but invisible) ecological catastrophe. *At Dusk* was made in Mikhailov’s hometown of Kharkiv (the city is 40 kilometres from the Russian border; in the USSR, the city was an important centre of scientific and artistic life), and the series depicts the disintegration of post-Soviet space. The images of human misery and urban decay comprising the *At Dusk* series and related to that formless historical moment have a blue tinge, producing a strange, uncanny, and depressing effect. Blue is traditionally the colour of death, along with black, and it is often a mostly defective colour in technical terms. It is precisely the colour blue that photographic emulsion is most sensitive to in traditional black-and-white photography. Mikhailov’s photographs therefore become a kind of sensitive seismography by which the colours are revealed through the darkroom process. The dominant blue tinge is obviously due to a technical error resulting from the lack of light and other colours: a fundamental flaw hindering and deforming a vision of the represented world and a flaw that—as Mikhailov seems to suggest—is inherent to post-Soviet reality (Szerszeń 2019).

At Dusk problematizes that represented world as a traumatic space marked by fundamental experiences of homelessness and of not belonging. The lack of home—an ambiguous metaphor yet a precise reference to social reality in the east of Ukraine in 1993—becomes a token of post-Soviet experience, a permanent condition that also describes relationships between images and history. A return to that which has been lost is impossible—socialism, empire, and a homogeneous and stable space, all the ideological constructs that for more than seventy years so decisively defined this space and life in it, have suddenly disappeared, so now what is possible is only to mediate between the past and the future, between that which has been realised and that which remained (the “past imperfect”), and finally between facts and affects. Here, the moment of political and economic transformation becomes a faded time-space “in-between”, in which, as Helen Petrovsky put it, “there seems to be no boundary between life and death, between heavy sleep and eternal oblivion” (Petrovsky 2003, p. 137). Dusk, a time of transition—neither day nor night, a time of negativity—is a particularly sensitive moment in which spectres are revealed: What is unburied, unfinished, and unfulfilled, be it imperial legacy, war, or utopia, returns here but as something invisible. The transitional space depicted in the photographs of this series, just like the very materiality of the photography made unreal by being tinted blue, become here the site of a haunting taking place on the edge between day and night.

Mikhailov returned to the childhood experience of war as a latent source of nostalgia and absence but also as the latent source of the image itself. It is identified with the colour blue:

1941. I was three years old and I can still remember the bombings, the howling sirens and the searchlights in the wonderful, dark-blue sky. Blue, blue, light-blue. . . For some reason we think that one generation will be spared a war. I see this blue series as the second. (Barnes and Best 2006, p. 142)

Here, as the artist suggested, the violence of war remains something unhealed, ever present although invisible to figures depicted in the photos, yet manifesting as omnipresent and flooding (blue) colour in the viewer’s eye. But the colour blue is exactly what remains

of the childish war experience and what survives, like an afterimage, in the undefined space in between the spectator and the world. This hidden visual, an embodied experience of violence, recurs as traumatic in the context of economic and political transformation: from part of the USSR to independent Ukraine and from socialism to capitalism. Photos in the *At Dusk* series can be seen as images in which two orders of memory—contemporary and historical—superimpose, yielding a complex temporal structure: successive layers of time coexist here (wartime, Soviet time, and new capitalism in the early 1990s). As the structure of the temporality of the image is disrupted, with it the myth of continuity (of empire, of narrative, etc.) is destroyed. It is something that through its spectral, incomplete nature is a source of suffering.

As Ulrich Baer suggested, there is a clear parallel between the structure of trauma and the experience of photography: “Because trauma blocks routine mental processes from converting an experience into memory or forgetting, it parallels the defining structure of photography, which also traps an event during its occurrence while blocking its transformation into memory” (Baer 2022, p. 9). From the outset, Mikhailov’s works also tend to problematize the nature of the medium. This holds true for the *At Dusk* series, where this relationship between photography and history takes on a spectral character, which means that sentiment of loss and displacement does not belong only to represented reality but also to photography as a supreme affective tool of touching the world. Photography, indeed, “can capture the shrapnel of traumatic time” (Baer 2022, p. 7). There seems to be in *At Dusk* an atmosphere of disturbing suspension, of standoffishness, in which the people captured in the photographs are stuck (but in which the Ukraine of 1993 also finds itself), and this is connected precisely with this impossibility of transformation an “experience into memory or forgetting”.

Here, we come closer to understanding the relationships between photography, history, and trauma. In Cathy Caruth’s book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, she noted that trauma remains something unrepresentable, as it escapes frames of normal experience (Caruth 1996; Bishop 2020). At this point, it is worth noting similar unrepresentable characteristics appearing in moments of historical transformations, transitions, and revolutions. Through their formlessness, they remain a problem for historians. Hayden White pointed this out:

Historians always have problems with transitional moments in the histories of their subjects. It is also because a “transition” is precisely what cannot be represented in any medium, because it is what happens “between” two states considered to be (relatively) stable. And this moment cannot be represented because it has the same status as the blank space that divides two frames of a movie film. The moment in which something becomes something else or something other than what it had earlier been cannot be represented through verbal or visual images because this moment is precisely a moment of the absence of presence, the moment at which one presence is drained of its substance and filled with another. And on any scientific account of this phenomenon, it must be said that such a moment is over-determined,—too full of causal forces—too fraught with “miracle” to be the subject of an explanation. (White 1999, p. 28)

White used the photographic metaphor in which the unrepresentable in historical experience is compared to the “blank space” between frames. Similarly, that which is not assimilated is relegated, like debris, to the margins of the image/memory/narrative—but it does not disappear completely. Through this kind of presence-absence, photography in its structure approaches trauma. A pertinent contribution can be added here by Georges Didi-Huberman, who in *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz* problematised the notion of the gap-image (*lacuna-image*). It can be both a place of disappearance and a place of trace. This apparent paradox was drawn by Didi-Huberman from an analysis of unique photographs taken outside the infamous gas chambers. In this case, the image is primarily an affect, a shred of the traumatised world:

Something remains that is not the thing, but a scrap of its resemblance. Something—very little, a film—remains of a process of annihilation: that something, therefore, bears witness to a disappearance while simultaneously resisting it, since it becomes the opportunity of its possible remembrance. It is neither full presence, nor absolute absence. (Didi-Huberman 2012, p. 167)

This “presence-absence”, the unassimilated remnant or debris, is what remains of a painful historical experience, and in its structure, it resembles the “space-in-between”. Photography and trauma are close again.

3. 2014: Traumatic Space

When Crimea was illegally annexed in 2014, and Russian aggression began against the Donbas region (effectively marking the beginning of the ongoing war in eastern Ukraine), this constituted a crucial caesura through which it suddenly became apparent that the post-Soviet legacy is a source of real suffering.

The Donetsk region—where the most intense engagements of the war took place in 2014 and 2015—is a space that bears the marks of a harsh past. The term “Donbas” (Donetsk Coal Basin) was first used in 1827 by the Russian mining engineer Yevgraf Kovalevsky; as a geological term, it belongs to the colonial history of the place. Along with Crimea, Odesa, Kherson, and surrounding areas at the mouth of the Dnieper River and on the shores of the Sea of Azov, the Donbas was part of an imperial concept dating back to the late eighteenth century and called *Novorossiia*. The development of its heavy industry dates back to the mid-nineteenth century and has become a key factor for the region. Intensive industrialisation has been accompanied, since the end of the eighteenth century, by a process of constant resettlement and erasure of the region’s earlier history. As a result, the landscape bears traces of permanent wounds, which until 2014 remained unremarked upon and almost invisible. Ukrainian researchers Darya Tsybalyuk and Kateryna Iakovlenko pointed out that in nineteenth-century Russian (imperial) art and literature, the area was depicted as empty and sparsely populated and therefore destined to be colonised, while the story of industrialisation covers up the other stories and violence inscribed in this space (Iakovlenko 2022; Tsybalyuk 2022). Meanwhile, “it is not only a narrative of the industry but also a narrative of survival, tragedy, and breakdown” (Iakovlenko 2022).

Viewed from this perspective, it is possible to look at the history of the Donbas and its images as a representation of a state of (permanent) colonial war against people and nature—a place where imperial necropolitics were/are tested. Imperial necropolitics locates the colonial violence away from (imperial) centres, out of sight of their inhabitants: on the periphery, on the border, and in places where the rules of law are diluted or suspended, where, as Achille Mbembe wrote, “the state of exception is deemed to operate in the service of ‘civilisation’” (Mbembe 2003, p. 24). Thus, the violence remains invisible—locked in a “blind spot” of (non)vision. The traumatised space does not bring peace to its inhabitants or to its landscape. The recent history is also about crisis, economic collapse, crime, and the constant Russian influence—and, finally, about the war. Time here takes on a cyclical character marked by the constant return of violence. Tamara Duda, author of the novel *Daughter*, the action of which takes place in the region during a period of ongoing conflict, wrote that:

The Donbas is ground zero, a place of power, where the most important questions resounded. That’s where the most important answers were hidden. Where everything began, everything will find its end when history comes full circle again. . . (Duda 2022, p. 314)

In this structure, the memory and awareness of violence appears after time, with a delay. But also, being constantly, subconsciously faced with it takes on characteristics of Freudian “working through”: “a working attached to a thought of what is constitutively hidden from us in the event” (Lyotard 1991, p. 26). This means, in this case (and against Freud), the impossibility of liberating oneself from spectres haunting that space.

The multidimensional problem of loss and the persistent attempt to overcome it became a key experience artists in the region faced after 2014. The developments of this intuition are *Blind Spot* (2014) and *Gradual Loss of Vision* (2017) by Mikola Ridnyi: The second work clearly references practices of avant-garde artists, especially Władysław Strzemiński's *Theory of Vision* (1947, published in 1958). In this series of drawings—rendered in a way conveying the experience of blurred, out-of-focus vision—formless, dark shapes appear as blobs, the detritus of common history. If we look closely, “sharpening” them in our imagination, each drawing begins to resemble the borders of areas (ex-Soviet) that in recent decades were “disappeared” from the territories of their countries and thus from maps, from collective and individual memory, and from the consciousness of the media: Transnistria, Crimea, Donbas (the Donetsk and Lugansk oblasts), Abkhazia, Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh, territories lost to the world overwhelmingly as a result of the Russian Federation's aggressive colonial politics. The illegibility of the images is combined with the fuzziness of history, which is written and still being written by the victors; the imperial viewpoint allows the maps and our perception of them to be manipulated at will, leaving vague what is inconvenient. This removes certain areas beyond geography and beyond visibility—a shift into blindness or blurriness. Ridnyi noted the following:

A friend of mine compared this work of mine to the invisibility of cancer. Everyone knows about cancer, everyone's afraid it, but we do not have one shared image reference in our head. However, there is also Susan Sontag's argument that it is not a good idea to project human diseases as metaphors for social conflicts or political events. (Ridnyi and Werner 2022)

Despite the validity of Sontag's remark, these drawings very powerfully evoke the image of a spreading disease and its subsequent metastases. Fuzzy spots can be an alarming symptom of a dangerous and invisible disease gaining more footholds in our bodies. Taken together, they already represent a deadly threat—a territory of devouring imagery.

Identifying spreading disease with imperial inclinations of the Russian Federation is a simple metaphor. *Gradual Loss of Vision*, however, transcends it, inviting us to reconsider the problem of vision and seeing. In his series, Ridnyi included drawings that directly evoke the nature of scientific charts and commentaries on relationships between eye diseases and changes in the visual field. When we lose our vision, we lose our overall view: We are left with fragments of reality, a random insight—while peripherally precise—into what is happening before our eyes. The final result of this process may be loss of vision: the blind spot of invisibility. The word “peripherality” here describes both an element of human physiology and the geographical and political location of “disappeared” territories, which is increasingly marginal and falling into oblivion.

Ridnyi's work is at once a reflection on the nature of the media, which “blinds” views of other people's suffering, and a reflection on history (written by victors and invalidating territories as much as people). His previous work, the photo series *Blind Spot* (2014), is based on a division between what is seen and what is hidden. We see parts of war ruins in some images, while most of those photos' surfaces have been left blinded. In others, it is the centre of the image that is obscured; only scraps of the photograph, its “periphery”, are visible, while the centre disappears, transformed into blackness. It is annoying, because we want to see the full picture and are accustomed to the availability of images and their constant presence. Yet, this eludes us. We find ourselves in the “blind spot”: a place from which we see badly. Therefore, at the same time, the very act of looking is, to some extent, problematised here. Ridnyi hides from us the entire atrocious reality of the war going on in Donbas—we are thus focused on a blind spot. Peggy Phelan drew attention to this aspect of photography and (more broadly) of looking:

“Some atrocity photographs gain power by exposing both the given-to-be-seen and the blind spot that is central to seeing a photograph. Indeed, insofar as some atrocity photographs are traumatic, it may be precisely because they expose this blind spot that constructs the limit within the act of seeing as such”. (Phelan 2012, p. 51)

The question of what is being hidden brings all the more anxiety: “The intractability of this blindness has often led to a hypervisibility, a somewhat desperate craving to see ever more that is itself a symptom of the grief born from partial sight,” Phelan continues (Phelan 2012, p. 58).

In *Blind Spot* and *Gradual Loss of Vision*, both created in direct response to Russian aggression, Ridnyi orientates us towards a kind of lay theory of vision, towards seeing as a sense that is crucial, while on the other hand, one should remain wary. In this case, seeing does not bring us closer to the truth; it confronts us instead with what is unclear, obscured, blurred, and even formless. Many things disappear or are removed—consciously or unconsciously—from the field of vision. However, do they fully disappear?

In his *A Theory of Vision*, Strzemiński described the notion of the “afterimage”, which is central to his late work:

Looking at any object, we retain its reflection in the eye. The light falling on the retina starts appropriate chemical processes, which last longer. When we stop looking at the object and shift our gaze elsewhere, an afterimage remains in the eye, a trace of an object of the same shape but opposite colour (due to the regenerative processes occurring in the eye). (Mościcki 2012, p. 337)

Thus, the afterimage is situated on the border between the conscious and the unconscious, as Paweł Mościcki noted:

That the visual remnant of afterimages constantly reminds us that we *no longer* see what we have before our eyes, sentencing our perception to the status of anachronistic images, touched by the stigma of what Freud called *Nachträglichkeit* (deferred action, retroaction, afterwardness). (Mościcki 2012, p. 338)

Being too late, seeing too late: There is a gap between vision and knowing. In this case, we can speak about the “loss”. This gap (or “blank space”) has characteristics that we attribute to trauma. In Ridnyi’s case, vision is traumatic by nature, while the eye itself becomes a space marked by trauma.

Let us return to Cathy Caruth. In “Traumatic Awakenings”, she directly touches the theme of delay as well as the complex relationships between the “immediate seeing of a violent event” and its understanding. Seeing does not mean knowing: as in Strzemiński’s afterimage, these two planes are split apart. Caruth wrote the following:

Traumatic experience, beyond the psychological dimensions of suffering it involves, suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it, that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness. The repetitions of the traumatic event [suggest] a larger relation to the event which extends beyond what can simply be seen or what can be known and is inextricably tied up with the belatedness and incomprehensibility that remain at the heart of this repetitive seeing. (Caruth 1996, pp. 91–92)

Trauma is thus located in the gap between vision and knowing, in the delay that occurs there. The compulsion to repeat is a source of suffering; however, it can also be a moment of overcoming the traumatic.

The compulsion to repeat is also the subject of another photographic project that is related to the space of the Donbas and the violence of the war’s necropolitics. In this case, the experience of loss gains a more literal sense. Lia Dostliev and Andrii Dostliev, artists from Donetsk in the Donbas region who problematise in their art the question of loss and trauma associated with wartime exile and the complex history of the region, said the following:

While packing documents and money in a hurry, we’ve left scattered grandmother’s photo albums, mother’s jewellery, and our first toys, all those trinkets that used to mark our progress in time. Those are the things that no one would rescue. They are useless for settling down in a new place. They would not make

your new life better. For many years, we've been stockpiling those silent witnesses of our existence only to abandon them in a critical moment, thus depriving ourselves of material memories. The scale of this trauma is yet to be estimated.

Cut off from our roots, deprived of past, uncertain about future, lacking support in the present, we are unable to move further until this loss is apprehended, described, and analysed, and until the emptiness caused by it is filled again. (Dostlieva and Dostliev 2016)

The need to leave home is often also associated with leaving behind one's belongings, clothes, furniture, and family heirlooms, usually forever. All this material heritage is a prosthesis of memory and identity and, in a situation of loss, leaves us naked. The family archive does not have to be extensive and complete and usually is not; its incompleteness and ephemerality is even something that gives it a human character and that makes it similar to a complex and multifaceted construction of memory: full of gaps, unclear moments, regressions, mistakes, and unwanted and traumatic memories. But what to do in the face of the loss of your private family archive, when there is no longer any material trace of it—when it is under occupation, passing into the ownership of enemies, or when it undergoes complete, irreversible destruction?

In the project *Occupation* (2015), Andrii Dostliev recounted a different kind of appropriation. In the summer of 2014, the artist's apartment was occupied during his absence; moreover, the whole of Donetsk then fell into the hands of pro-Russian separatists. Return was therefore impossible. It became clear that all family and personal heirlooms, life's micro-archive, were lost, and from then on, those things were also under occupation or may have no longer existed. This kind of loss means a break in the continuity of one's history. Faced with the loss of family photos, Dostliev decided to "reconstruct them" (to reconstruct the "non-existence" (Dostlieva and Dostliev 2016)) using found materials: photos bought at flea markets, dating back to Soviet times. These were selected according to physical resemblances between anonymous people in the photos and members of his family (those long dead and those who chose to remain in the occupied territory) and became the basis for creating dozens of collages in which Dostliev's history was intertwined with the history of the Other, as if the denunciation of trauma could only take place through someone coming from the outside (Caruth 1996, p. 56), from a completely unexpected direction. Photography thus becomes a space for a peculiar dialogue in which an "auto-photo-biography" is reconstructed from scraps of private stories.

Reclaiming one's biography from non-self stories is a process that resembles the work of mourning: The homelessness of other people's photos serves to symbolically reconstruct one's lost home. At the same time, *Occupation* is a work of subversion; it is primarily intended to neutralise or to cancel out the oppression experienced: "To occupy somebody else's memorabilia exactly the same way my own were occupied", Dostliev declared (Dostlieva and Dostliev 2016). The occupation of other people's photos and other people's memories is only seemingly violent—in fact, it is an expression of care towards what has also been abandoned, a form of care exercised over homeless images. At the same time, photography is understood here as a medium that transmits trauma: Some images he selected were taken in Abkhazia, Crimea, and Transnistria, areas occupied and destabilised by the Russian Federation and places that, like the Donbas, are being "disappeared" from the map, just as private photos in an occupied apartment in Donetsk disappeared.

Not only does the reuse of photographic material have a subversive effect, but it is also associated with the very essence of what might be called the "traumatic". As Marianna Michałowska noted in analysing the relationship between the traumatic and the documentary in the medium of photography, the archive not only (or not so much) preserves the event, but also removes it from us:

Similar to traumatic experiences, photography is a repression of an event in the consciousness. Transferring an event to photographic paper and creating an archive absolves us from the responsibility of thinking about it. The photographed

past disappears from our memory horizon. At the same time, it is saved somehow, even though it is not seen. Photography permits a strange kind of behaviour: things we do not want to remember can be put aside ‘for later’—we can move them away from us. (Michałowska 2015, p. 60)

We are thus left here in a strange suspension: in uncertainty regarding whether or not the use of other people’s found photographs as a gesture of symbolic recuperation is, in this case, pushing away the traumatic or passing it on.

4. 2022: Suffering Space

Any “gap in understanding” since 2014 about the actual nature and purpose of Russian actions in Donbas and Crimea has been filled by the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. Today, it is difficult to find a similar degree of misunderstanding to that which accompanied the “disappearing” in 2014–2015 of Crimea and Donbas from maps and from the attention of Western media. Recalling Tamara Duda’s words (“Where everything began, everything will find its end when history comes full circle again”), we can instead reflect on the recurrent nature of suffering and traumatic images. The 2022 invasion does not invalidate the suffering experienced before; it is possible, therefore, to wonder about the possible ways of transmitting trauma through images and to consider how the use of photography can neutralise or instead transfer it. Perhaps, however, the situation of unprecedented and perfectly visualised oppression against Ukraine gives new dimensions and new directions for understanding suffering and trauma, allowing affects and images to be recognised in other images in a “multidirectional history of suffering” (Rothberg 2009). The point of reference has become Crimea and Donbas and 2014 and also the history of suffering from other times (the Executed Renaissance and Holodomor in the 1930s, Russian imperial oppression in the Caucasus and Central Asia, and finally the Second World War) and other cultures and latitudes (war in Syria, Palestine, anti-imperial guerrillas in Latin America, etc.).

This extension of trauma in time and space appears in Nina Zakhovchenko’s play *Me, War and Toy Grenade*, created as an immediate reaction a few weeks after Russia’s full invasion in February 2022. In its epilogue, this theme resonates. In it, Zakhovchenko looks at war in Ukraine through the prism of war in Syria, which has been going on for years, casting light on a kind of sensitivity to violence, a hypersensitivity that allows finding oneself in others’ suffering and, in one’s own way, incorporating it into one’s experience. Zakhovchenko connects this issue with looking: The alternating opening and closing of eyes (closing: Syria; opening: Ukraine) becomes organically connected with the view of disasters and with the need to confront the reality of war:

I close my eyes. I look at a Syrian boy covered in dust who was taken out from the blockage. He is alive but shocked. He lost his speech. I lose it sometimes as well. But I look for it. [...]

I open my eyes and put a full stop. 14 of May 2022. Lviv. 80th day of war. (Zakhovchenko 2022, p. 338)

In an earlier scene, a different image appears. It concerns falling to pieces and being recomposed, put back together, but already in a different way: the view of eternal suffering.

Sasha wrote: I just had a nightmare
I’m so fucked up I’m scared
in my dream
I’m in our old apartment in Donetsk
the Russian soldiers are coming
I want to run away
they grabbed me
they tied me up and they shot me
I have a hole in my stomach

a real hole
and then in my dream
I woke in my bed in Irpin
I'm cold
someone is knocking on the door
I go to see who it is
and I open the door
instead of a house there is a huge hole
the hole from an explosion
I'm standing on the ninth floor
looking down
and my house is destroyed
my apartment is destroyed
I'm dizzy
and I fall down
and I wake up
I crawl across the field
quietly, on my elbows
I know that the soldiers are nearby
I need to move a little forward
and I will be safe
but out of the corner of my eye I notice a tripwire
and I do not have time to remove my hand
and I touch it
and I collapse
and then I exploded into 1000 pieces. (Zakhozhenko 2022, pp. 308–9)

We are somewhere on the border between dream and daydream, in a strange place in-between marked by constant awakenings. Falling asleep and waking up, falling and crawling, and escaping and being unable to escape: this scene of a complex, meandering nature captures the unsettled state in which one finds oneself when subjected to war's trauma. In this case, it is associated with the obsession with death and with the loss of home: The lost apartment in Donetsk turns into the one in Irpin, a place that was hit hard in the invasion's first weeks; the war in Donbas (2014) overlaps and intersects with the 2022 invasion. Transferred trauma means an inability to sleep and the constant need for escape. Meanwhile, it is impossible to "get out of the picture": Trauma "traps an event during its occurrence while blocking its transformation into memory" (Baer 2022, p. 9).

The fantasy of the body exploding and falling to pieces that ends the scene introduces yet another dimension. It is the postcolonial context in which the theme of the impossibility of liberating oneself from the trauma of violence and humiliation plays such an important role. This is not surprising: Russia's aggression has opened up a whole space of postcolonial and decolonial readings, showing the relationships between what can be called "Ukrainian suffering" and that which we know from the history of Western colonialism. Frantz Fanon, in the chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks* titled "The Experience of Black Life", described the recurring suffering of the colonised subject through the image of disintegrating under the gaze that persistently falls and then painfully reassembling—already in a different way: "I explode. Here are the fragments put together by another me" (Fanon 2008, p. 89). This process is endless; in a world marked by colonial or wartime oppression, the image of the disintegration of the self and the impossibility of reconstructing it signifies a state of permanent anxiety and is something difficult to describe. It means that the memory of past suffering updates anew in the future and becomes a painful trace. This strange hybrid temporality of the traumatic view means the return of the same: the process of mourning remains incomplete in the face of this, something that constantly eludes attempts to frame the suffering.

But the trauma is also transmitted by the land itself: In some places in eastern and south-eastern Ukraine, the ground becomes one big graveyard, where the remains of human bodies are mixed with iron—with the still-active mines and shells—and the various forms of contamination to which the war has led. This material dimension of trauma—where we literally have to deal with the suffering of matter and its “radiation” (or transmission) into humans—became the subject of documentary photographer Yana Kononova’s photo series *Izium Forest* and *Radiation of War*. The *Radiation of War* series has been (and still is) in the making since almost the very beginning of the war operations, from March 2022. In a series of carefully composed black and white photographs taken with a medium format camera, we see fragments of deformed matter: traces of the war destruction. Kononova put it as follows:

The term ‘radiation’ alludes to that composite, to the polluted nature of the experience of war, to the fact that in its perception there is always something beyond visual information—some kind of hum, some kind of trembling—that changes our sense of space. It passes through memory, through the body, beyond the body, through generations. (from the page of The Institute of Human Sciences)

While in *Radiation of War*, the photographer focuses on the wounds inflicted on inanimate matter as an externalisation of the war’s necropolitics and, perhaps above all, the wounds inflicted on Ukrainian society, in *Izium Forest*, she turns her attention to the human being. Here, military medics and rescue workers in white outfits are placed in the centre, exhuming newly discovered mass graves in a forest near the town of Izium in the Kharkiv region. (Izium is home to a large memorial to the victims of another mass crime committed against Ukrainians, the Holodomor.) In photographs captured during this archaeological, forensic process, they are caring for the dead as much as the living, treating the remains of the bodies with care not only because they are evidence of genocide but also with empathy for those who are dead as a form of doing justice. *Izium Forest* is a photographic installation consisting of a series of several large-format photographs. It is not clear whether the people portrayed in the sequence of photographs are the same persons, captured at different times and from different angles, or whether the work has the character of a more classic documentary panorama composed of a series of images of different moments and different people. This operation leaves us in a state of uncertainty: The place from which we observe is somehow incorporated into the represented scene. Above all, however, we do not see what they see: the bodies being excavated from the ground. Again, as Peggy Phelan remarked, “some atrocity photographs are traumatic, it may be precisely because they expose this blind spot that constructs the limit within the act of seeing as such” (Phelan 2012, p. 51).

But the images sometimes also serve in trying to overcome the permanence of the traumatic view and to at least partially neutralise the suffering. Kateryna Iakovlenko, the researcher and curator mentioned above, in a text on the images of this war and their various collective uses, highlighted the way that the strategies and functioning of visual testimonies of war have changed. They are sometimes used to try to overcome trauma and to neutralise its paralysing and painful impacts. Iakovlenko described the example of Yuri Larin’s photograph of a murdered man’s hand, found in one mass grave in liberated Izium. The wrist was encircled by a rubber bracelet in the colours of the Ukrainian flag—a patriotic gadget that took on a new symbolic meaning in the first days of the invasion. After this find, social media was flooded with a wave of posts, each consisting of two images: the photo by Larin and another showing the hand of the person posting, wearing a similar bracelet. In this case, the simple gesture of passing on or “capturing” a violent image—the one showing destruction, death, and suffering—can intentionally minimise its effect, becoming an act of resistance and solidarity. Thus, it constitutes a situation where “by eye-witnessing unjust violence, sharing and posting images by the oppressed becomes a form of speech and protest” (Iakovlenko 2023). Photography calls for collective action against invasion; it shows a community of suffering: It thus turns “I” into “we” and the individual pain into the collective one.

5. Conclusions

“All the fears at the end of the Soviet era were connected with the fact that it was unclear where the danger was coming from”, recounted photographer Misha Pedan, associated with the same Kharkiv School of Photography as Boris Mikhailov (Pedan 2019). The photographer’s words seem to touch on the very essence of the connection between history and trauma as it can be understood in the case of Ukraine. Reality, for example, as in Mikhailov’s project *Red*, has been permanently “coloured” by imperial violence, made invisible just as colour itself becomes invisible in a certain way over time. This invisibility of historical, imperial oppression remains something that haunts the post-Soviet space, causing anxiety, suffering, and an inherent split in the experience of looking and knowing:

For trauma to be understood, its ‘immediacy’ must be studied as it unfolds according to its own dynamic, at once outside of and yet inside of the same moment, as a kind of index of a historical reality—a historical reality ‘to whose truth there is no simple access’. (Baer 2022, pp. 10–11)

In keeping with these remarks from Baer, my aim was to reveal this uneasy dynamic of trauma in its relation to history and to images. In this sense, it seems that the division outlined in the text (“1993: Haunted Space”, “2014: Traumatic Space”, and “2022: Suffering Space”) reflects the successive stages of the traumatic relationship with history. The “haunted space” is a place where anxiety remains difficult to define or to name—it is more of an atmosphere than something of a precise nature. The “traumatic space” has more to do with the touch of the real when suffering is very tangible, but there is still a rupture between vision and understanding. This suffering is multiplied also by the fact that it was a (so-called) “war without a name”, portrayed by Russian propaganda and much of the Western media as an “internal conflict” on the margins and therefore something that gradually disappeared. Finally, “suffering space” is identified here with the final disillusion and recognition about the sources of the trauma. However, revelation does not abolish suffering and its mutations.

From the economic and political transformation of the 1990s to ongoing war today, in various ways, the question of trauma and loss haunts Ukrainian art (as it does across the entire post-Soviet space). Meanwhile, photography, as a medium oscillating constantly between the visible and the invisible, presence and absence, and vision and knowing, has a special role to play here. Since traumatic images transform and question the medium, a discussion about trauma becomes a discussion about the image in itself.

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