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**BEING CLOSE TO FAR AWAY**

MICHAILO MINAS TULEK

THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Imaging Arts

School of Photographic Arts and Sciences

College of Imaging Arts and Sciences

Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester, NY

May 2013

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# **Being Close to Far Away**

By

Michailo Minas Tulek

BFA, Liberal Arts, Sarah Lawrence College, May 2003

MFA, Imaging Arts, Rochester Institute of Technology, May 2013

## **Abstract**

In 1948 my great-grandfather was imprisoned in a Russian forced labor camp known as the Gulag, an acronym for the title “Chief Administration of Corrective Labor Camps and Colonies” (Главное управление исправительно-трудовых лагерей и колоний). Surviving this life event pushed my great-grandfather beyond the limits of civil society, rationality, and empathy into a world that author Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn called, “an unassimilable spiritual earthquake which not every person can cope with.”<sup>1</sup> Like millions of others, my great grandfather took a journey into the “Gulag country,” a place beyond “vision” or “understanding.”<sup>2</sup> In the fall of 2012, I too traveled to the Gulag country, in order to trace the footsteps of my great-grandfather. *Being Close to Far Away* explores a post-traumatic environment in Vorkuta, Russia, a former location of the Gulag, and the camp where my great-grandfather was imprisoned. The Gulag was shrouded in secrecy by the Soviet Government until the death of Stalin, and my great-grandfather disappeared behind this shroud for seven years (1948-1955). This thesis project is in part to reclaim those years for him, for myself, and for my family. I photographed the prison sites extensively. I did so in order to explore the traces and scars of the Gulag.

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<sup>1</sup> Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago 1918 – 1956: An experiment in Literary Investigation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, 4.



# **BEING CLOSE TO FAR AWAY**

MICHAILO MINAS TULEK

THESIS



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To my committee, thank you for helping me grow and produce quality work.

And finally, to my great-grandfather, who made it out, and told the story.



## I. Introduction

I worked as an assistant to a prominent war photographer prior to graduate school. During my employment, I developed an interest in exploring the idea of trauma and war as they related to the images of violence I was exposed to on a daily basis. Although I had never experienced violence on the level depicted in the images I worked with, I became aware of the devastating effect of this violence because the photographers I worked with exhibited the latent and eerie effects of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In some ways, the PTSD that I observed gave me a far more powerful testimony of war than the images these photographers had taken. Due to this experience, trauma, violence, and violence in social media became a focal point of study and consideration as I began to expand my knowledge and understanding of photography. I am in debt to a select group of theorists and writers who informed this study and propelled me to concentrate my MFA thesis on the aesthetic and theoretical discourses of trauma in photography.



## II. Critical and Aesthetic Influences

Among a large group of critical and aesthetic influences, Susie Linfield, Ulrich Baer, Susan Sontag, Ruth Leys, Jean Baudrillard, and Vilém Flusser, have played a crucial role in informing my process. In particular, Linfield's book *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence* (2010) helped me contextualize the criticism of photography that I was being to in graduate studies. I needed to contend with post-modernism in particular, because this style of criticism regarded the photograph "not as something to be experienced and understood but, rather, as an enemy to be vigilantly guarded against."<sup>3</sup> Linfield offered an argument that provided a way to work past some of the iron tenets of the post-modernism without disregarding or neglecting the important contribution that post-modernism has made to photography.

In Baer's *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma* (2002), I found the conceptual framework that best suited the concepts and aesthetics of my work. Baer advanced my understanding of the role of photography as an important tool in documenting the human condition. Baer presented thought-provoking ideas and powerful conceptual tools that reaffirmed photography as a significant force of representation. As he notes, the photograph "is explosive, instantaneous, distinct—a chance to see in a photograph not narrative, not history, but possibly trauma."<sup>4</sup> Baer points to photography, both practically and conceptually, as the preeminent tool to access the difficult subject of trauma.

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<sup>3</sup> Susie Linfield, *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 2010), 4.

<sup>4</sup> Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma* (Cambridge: The MIT Press), 6.



During the time I was exploring the ideas of Linfield, Baer, and others, I was also exposed to the photographic work of Richard Mosse, Luc Delahaye, Sanna Kannisto, Mikael Levin and Paul Graham. These photographers helped me realize the potential for documentary realism to find a place within contemporary discourses of art, art theory, and contemporary media. I was drawn to these photographers because their images asked important questions about the act of photographing, while still maintaining a faithful veracity to the subject matter depicted in the images. For example, in *Infra* (2012), Mosse employs a discontinued false-color surveillance film to photograph conflict in the Congo in order to “struggle with the challenge of representing abstract or contingent phenomena that are virtually impossible to see, or at least very difficult to put before a camera lens.”<sup>5</sup> Mosse simultaneously addresses issues of representation in photography while also respecting the complex social and geopolitical content within the images.

Levin, a photographer who strongly influenced the method and practice of this thesis, engages the landscape tradition of art and photography in order to explore former sites of concentration camps throughout Europe. Levin traveled across Europe to follow in the footsteps of his father. Meyer Levin, one of the first journalists to report on the devastation of the concentration camps at the close of World War II, a journey that would in some ways echo my own efforts to engage the Gulag camps. Baer notes that Levin’s images:

*Rely on the landscape tradition, not to point to the historical event or the genre’s corruption but to position us in relation to the fact that event consisted in the radical destruction and unavailability of explanatory contexts. It is the unavailability of referential markers, and not information that could be embedded in historical contexts, that is captured in these images as truth of history.*<sup>6</sup>

What Baer calls “the unavailability of referential markers” I call being close to far away.

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<sup>5</sup> Joerg Colberg, “A conversation with Richard Mosse,” *Conscientious Extended*, September 21, 2010, [http://jmcolberg.com/weblog/extended/archives/a\\_conversation\\_with\\_richard\\_mosse/](http://jmcolberg.com/weblog/extended/archives/a_conversation_with_richard_mosse/) (Accessed April 2, 2013)

<sup>6</sup> Baer, *Spectral Evidence*, 71.





### III. Theory and Concept

The title of this thesis, *Being Close to Far Away*, suggests an essential characteristic of trauma. Trauma suggests “a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it.”<sup>7</sup> One cannot be close to far away just as one cannot be close to trauma. Events such as the Gulag and the Holocaust resemble trauma because they resist integration into any known philosophical or clinical context, and like trauma, the title also suggests a relationship, and the question of relationship to and with an event that is unrelatable to, or impossible to imagine or comprehend. Despite the paradoxical nature of trauma, the need to establish a relationship with it is a driving force in culture, art, philosophy, and psychology. It is also the driving force of this thesis, and photography is the tool used to explore the possibility of establishing a relationship with this trauma.

The difficulty of treating trauma as a visual subject arises because it describes a condition rather than an object. This condition is the emotional after-effect of an experience that “imposes itself outside the grasp of our cognition.”<sup>8</sup> Trauma is also a subject that imposes itself outside the grasp of our vision. It does not exist in a tactile manner, and therefore possesses no physical register or photographability. Photographing this type of trauma is difficult because the mechanical gaze of the camera is incapable of registering subject matter that lacks a corporal aspect, such as trauma, history, and the past. However, although the photograph may be powerless to provide an ontic connection, the power of the photo-image rests in its ability to reference what is or is not in the frame and what possibilities lay beyond the frame. This referential ability is powered by the photo-image’s superficial qualities, or as Flusser notes, “the specific ability to abstract surfaces out of space and time and to project them back into space and time”<sup>9</sup> as symbols.

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<sup>7</sup> Cathy Caruth, “Traumatic Awakenings,” *Violence, Identity, and Self-Determination*, ed. Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 208.

<sup>8</sup> Baer, *Spectral Evidence*, 10.

<sup>9</sup> Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2000), 8.



For example, through reference and symbol Mosse and Levin give shape and form to various traumas. Mosse's use of Kodak Aerochrome creates a striking magenta color out of the dense and rich foliage of the Congo interior. As Mosse notes, "I wanted to bring Kodak to bear on Kodak."<sup>10</sup> The magenta color acts as a reference point within the image itself. Aerochrome was originally used to detect enemy positions in dense green undergrowth. By using a false color technique to differentiate between camouflage and chlorophyll green, the film granted military analysts "a way to perceive its hidden enemy."<sup>11</sup> In the context of Mosse's documentary-like style, the magenta color disrupts the veracity of the images and conveys passage into a fictive world as descriptive and monstrous as Joseph Conrad's *In the Heart Of Darkness*. The magenta color acts as code and symbol for things that lay beneath and hidden, such as trauma, repression, and historical violence.

Levin employs other photographic techniques to offer a similarly compelling visual language in order to convey a sense of self-reflexivity and contemplation upon what may lay beneath or outside the frame of the image. He locates sites described in the many reports, dispatches, and photographs of his father's news coverage on the conditions of liberated concentration camps. Levin reexamines these locations with the camera lens in order to,

*See how the events of the war were remembered in the landscape. I wanted to see if a place in itself, just of itself, can carry the memory of what happened there or if it has to be something built that carries the memory. In retracing my father's journey that's what I was looking for.*<sup>12</sup>

Levin approaches these landscapes with the precision and practice of a Modernist black-and-white master, honing subtle variations of the gray scale to produce work that coats anonymous landscapes with the history of extermination. Both Mosse and Levin drew work from traumatic contexts that possess deep and historic association with photographic representation.

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<sup>10</sup> Joerg Colberg, "A conversation with Richard Mosse," *Conscientious Extended*, September 21, 2010, [http://jmcolberg.com/weblog/extended/archives/a\\_conversation\\_with\\_richard\\_mosse/](http://jmcolberg.com/weblog/extended/archives/a_conversation_with_richard_mosse/) (Accessed April 6, 2013)

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Mikael Levin, "War Story Interview," *Mikaelllevin.com*, [http://www.mikaelllevin.com/war\\_story/Interview.html](http://www.mikaelllevin.com/war_story/Interview.html) (accessed April 8, 2013).



While the Gulag shares the same shattering qualities of trauma with the Holocaust and the wars in the Congo, it differs in that it lacked the contemporary scrutiny of the photographic lens and other modes of representation. The full details of the Gulag were not truly known until the Soviet Union fell and modern Russia no longer had the desire or resources to hide such a traumatic episode of its history. Due to the Iron Curtain, the Gulag was closed to scrutiny from the international community, and because of Soviet Russia's repressive regime, internal photographic documentation is rare. It was illegal to photograph the camps or anything connected with them, and Soviet authorities did not document them for internal purposes. Unrepresented, hidden, lurking, uncontextualized—the Gulag is truly a traumatic history. Fortunately, within my own family, a unique set of circumstances have led to a type of representational documentation of the Gulag.



## IV. Field Experience, Both Current and Historical

Although this thesis was created a relatively short time ago, the seeds for the project were planted more than two decades ago. When I was seven I was fond of dumpster diving. For me the allure of climbing into a large dumpster and rummaging for treasures was far more appealing than chores, friends, or sports. Upon one such dive, I found a brand new VHS camcorder. It was completely intact and fully functional. I brought the camcorder home to my father and it became a treasured object for our family. This camcorder played prominently in my youth. Always present, the camcorder was an important element in family activities and other notable events.

The camcorder's gaze also fell upon my great-grandfather. In an effort to preserve family history, my father recorded my great-grandfather's account of surviving the Gulag. His account was indecipherable to me at the time because he spoke only in Ukrainian. However, the significance of his account was communicated in other ways.

The tapes my father made gained a type of weight over the years. A hard-nosed immigrant to New York who grew up both in the Ukraine and America with very few material goods, my father protected the tapes in a manner indicative of their value. He took care of the tapes, packaged them, repackaged them, hid them from harm, and hid them again. This constant emphasis on the tape's importance left an imprint upon me. The tapes gained an emotional currency of urgency and significance.

Yet the tapes remained a cipher to me until my father began telling me stories about my great-grandfather, which were facsimiles of what I presumed was contained on the tapes. I had always assumed that my father's stories were the same stories that my great-grandfather told. It was not until fairly recently, within the past five years, that I discovered my father's version of these stories were not entirely accurate.





As a photographer and visual storyteller, I found myself in a strategically important position as next in line to receive, interpret, and present these family tales. However, my position was complicated by the fact that I realized some of the stories were inaccurate. Should I continue in the telling of the mimetic stories of my father, doomed to repeat their inherited inaccuracy? This position left me feeling powerless to negotiate a trauma that had had an indirect effect upon my entire existence.

Possessed by an almost existential need to understand my anxiety of powerlessness, I decided to move beyond the layer of representation that had been created for me by the tapes and my father's stories. Delahaye uses a similar technique in his work, which like that of Mosse and Levin, involves working in traumatic contexts coated in many layers of representation. However, Delahaye treats the layering of representation as a hurdle to overcome: "I have to go through that saturation of facts and absence of meaning before I decide to set out, and at that point setting out amounts to plunging into reality, in a fairly primitive way actually, with the idea of confronting things as they are."<sup>13</sup> I decided to plunge into reality in order to address trauma, the Gulag, and the stories that I had been told by my father. Delahaye describes this process as "primitive" because the "plunge" is a traumatic event itself. It carries with it a sense of the original event, a pinch of discomfort that echoes the infinitely worse trauma of the Gulag experience. For instance, my great-grandfather was transported by train to the Gulag; I too, took a lengthy train ride to the Arctic location of the Gulag site. Once in Vorkuta, I had to confront "things as they are," which left me uncertain about

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<sup>13</sup> Luc Delahaye, *Luc Delahaye 2006-2010* (London: Steidl, 2010), 3.



what I should do or how I should approach the act of photographing. Many challenges presented themselves to me, which ultimately shaped the outcome of the images. I recorded some of these instances in a blog I kept while working in the field:

*A significant obstacle stood before me like a cliff wall during those initial days: the Gulag no longer existed. The place I had come to see and experience, the place I only knew through fiction, documentary, history, and most importantly, my great-grandfather's stories, no longer existed. The shacks, barbwire fences, and guard towers, which typified most gulag camps, had been destroyed many decades ago in an attempt to bury the past.<sup>14</sup>*

However, in a very short period of time, I made a number of contacts who assisted me in a process that ultimately led me to a group of people who keep the memory of the Gulag alive in varying degrees; to some it is a kind of hobby while to others it is an obligation. Among the latter type, I met a schoolteacher who created her own Gulag museum in a spare classroom, and another such individual, a retired architect, who hopes to erect large monuments in memory of the countless victims who perished in the prisons. This contemporary Gulag culture played an important role in helping me connect to a past to which I otherwise had no corporeal access. These individuals acted as the closest thing to a collective voice from the past. One person in particular who had a strong influence upon me was Victor H., who drove me (not out of a sense of obligation, but because I hired him) to the former sites of the Gulag. I could have done so on my own, but seeing those sites without his voice would have been too silent for me to bear, and bear witness to. As I wrote in my blog:

*His (Victor H.) stories, experiences, and anecdotes wove a blanket of memory and nostalgia over a landscape that was barren and wild to my eyes. He was a guide to an unseen world, and led me to a land of death: the archipelago. As I groped with my camera and imagination to understand my own presence in this place where memory, history, story, and a vacant present met, the ground of these sites seemed to rumble with silence. What secrets this land held.<sup>15</sup>*

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<sup>14</sup> Misha Tulek, "The Long Walk," *Words and Images*, <http://www.mishatulek.blogspot.com/2012/10/the-long-walk.html> (Accessed April 9, 2013)



The process of meeting people inexorably led me to the Gulag sites themselves. These sites played an essential role in forming the symbolic motifs and characteristics of my images. It makes sense that a location like Vorkuta was chosen for the Gulag because it is so far away from places like Rome, Jerusalem, Athens, and other birthplaces of Western civilization. Inscribed in this notion of geographical distance is also a distance from occidental ideals of rationality, government, religiosity, and morality, ideas with an overall humanistic ethos that would propose to negate the possibility of a place like the Gulag. These sites represent "the metaphorical further of a definitive beyond."<sup>16</sup> This beyond is a place of impossibility; like the Holocaust, it is the end of all existential, aesthetic, historicist, and romanticist readings of culture. Yet, such culturally and traumatically loaded sites as found in Vorkuta reveal none of this significance.



Although the sites depicted in these thesis images once belonged to an extensive network of prisons, the subjects of these same images lay in stark contrast to the Gulag because the landscapes, objects, and people that populate the images no longer contain clear relationships to the Gulag history. Therefore, the subject matter is neither the Gulag history nor the purely illustrative aspect of the images. To the mechanical gaze of the camera, the Gulag history and trauma manifests itself only as absence. The idea of photographing absence is conceptually cumbersome until one realizes that it can be a subject matter unto itself. By applying the aesthetic conventions of landscape and documentary photography to the blank Gulag sites, the photo image draws the viewer into a paradox: seeing nothing. The images themselves focus upon the lack of marker, emptiness, and ambiguity. I chose to use a neutral film, which suited the overcast and muted landscape of the Arctic. I made an effort to empty the frame of photographic convention in order to emphasize this nothingness. In Baer's reading of the photograph, this technique can "stage not a return of the real but its first appearance."<sup>17</sup> This first appearance, which is accomplished through symbolic inference and photographic rendering, constitutes a type of integration into history and aesthetics of the Gulag trauma, which has a powerful effect in that such photographs "can make us, as viewers, responsible for the first time for a past moment that has been blasted out of time."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Nadine Fresco, "Remembering the Unknown," *International Review of Psycho-Analysis* 11 (1984), 424.

<sup>17</sup> Baer, *Spectral Evidence*, 12.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*





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At a certain point the photographs show their own logic  
and fit together with disregard to subject or intention.  
They are a kind of silence.



# Gulag Images

Vorkuta, Russia: September 2012











































































































































