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The Images between Iconoclasm and Iconophilia – War against War by Ernst Friedrich

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ABSTRACT. There are two main accounts considering images which can be called, in general, iconoclasm and iconophilia. The first can be characterized as a distrust of images, the second is connected with a belief in their power. In this article, I analyze some theories concerning these attitudes. To do so, I refer to W. J. T. Mitchell and Bruno Latour. In the context of this issue, I analyze the book by Ernst Friedrich *War against War* in which he tries to find another solution between iconoclasm and iconophilia. I show, recalling Jacques Rancière, how Friedrich uses this strategy to change the distribution of the sensible in the case of the First World War.

1.

Wars between iconophiles and iconoclasts have a long and complex tradition in the history of images. They are waged both in practice and on the battlefields of theory. Iconophilia can be described in general as a belief in images and their unique power, while iconoclasm is characterized by a distrust of images and an attempt to get rid of them. In our times, as W. J. T.

¹ Email: ptaszekpliszek@gmail.com Among the people who have helped me develop my ideas for this paper I would especially like to thank Adam Andrzejewski PhD, Piotr Schollenberger PhD, Zuzanna Sękowska and Adam Klewenhagen. I would also like to thank Kamil Lemanek for the proofreading and the publishing house Oficyna Wydawnicza Bractwa Trojka.

Mitchell says, the iconoclast is in the lead, especially among leftist-thinkers. But there are also some exceptions, and one of them is a pacifist, Ernst Friedrich, who tries to wage a different war, war against war, by using both iconophilic and iconoclastic weapons.

In this paper, some issues connected with the division between iconoclasm and iconophilia are analyzed in the context of the cultural function of images. It focuses mostly on stances which show that both iconoclasm and iconophilia are ideal constructs and that in practice we can find lots of different positions which are in-between. The thesis of the paper is that *War against War* by Ernst Friedrich is an attempt to find a third way which combines both iconoclasm and iconophilia. It is also an example of applying this third way not only to theory but, first of all, to political practice.

War against War is a book created by Ernst Friedrich and published in 1924 in Berlin. It contains around 250 photos of the First World War. Friedrich combines two types of photos – propaganda photos from newspapers and those snatched from medical and military archives. Every photo is accompanied by a short quote taken from newspapers or a sentence made up by Friedrich. They are often contrasted in an ironic way. The album is preceded by a manifesto in which Friedrich criticizes the discourse of “Field of Honour”, which glorifies the war. He believes that if people understood that “in all wars the object is to protect and seize [the] money and property and power” (Friedrich, 2017, p. 50) of the bourgeoisie, they

would strike against it and create a society of “Man and Love”.

Lit de Augustusdagen 1914 — Geestdriflig . . . waarvoor? . . .

From the August days of 1914 — Enthusiastic . . . for what? . . .



Aus den Augusttagen 1914. — Begeistert . . . wofür? . . .

Des jours d'août en 1914 — Enthousiasmés . . . pour quoi? . . .

Od pierwszych dni sierpnia 1914 — Entuzjazm ? ...

Figure 1: “From the August days of 1914 – Enthusiastic... for what? ...”

(Friedrich, 2017, p. 78)



Figure 2: “...for the ‘field of honour’” (Friedrich, 2017, p. 79)



Figure 3: “For the interests of Capital...” (Friedrich, 2017, p. 116)



Figure 4: "... and the glory of the Monarchy" (Friedrich, 2017, p. 117)

2.

The division between iconoclasm and iconophilia is more complex and ambiguous than it may seem at the first glance. According to Mitchell, iconoclasts always accuse some "others" of being idolaters and create a stereotype revealing those others as those who naively and dangerously believe in "living images". Iconoclasm is then used not only to discredit images but to discredit people and to create a division between "us" and "them". But paradoxically iconoclasts and idolaters have more in common

than they want to admit. To attack images with such passion, iconoclasts have to believe that there are idolaters who are “possessed” by images. By doing so they also acknowledge the overwhelming power of images instead of treating them more as a result of power.

The iconoclastic attitude is especially strong in discussions about representing traumatic events, especially in the context of Shoah. In *Images in Spite of All* (2012), Georges Didi-Huberman analyses photos taken by prisoners from Sonderkommando in Auschwitz and describes how the anti-representation discourse which presents itself as highly ethical is in fact exactly the opposite. In fact, its proclaimers use it so as not to look at something that they do not want to look at. At the same time, they establish that some events cannot be represented by images, so the images which show them should be destroyed. But it is, as Didi-Huberman underlines, our ethical duty to be confronted with these images. Certainly, photos from Auschwitz and those presented in *War against War* have different statuses, for instance, because of those who made them – prisoners from Sonderkommando as victims or photographers hired by the military apparatus. But on some level these images have a lot in common. They are both “naked images”, as Jacques Rancière would say². They testify to what is shown in the photos but they also testify about that which is not and cannot be shown as a whole – the horror of the Holocaust or the First World War. These are images which not only have to be shown to give their

² See Rancière (2009).

testimony but also to demand ethical reactions.

Mitchell writes that iconophilia itself is also not a consistent concept. Its different shades are represented by idolatry, fetishism and totemism. This last one could be a positive answer to iconoclasm. He characterizes it:

The attitude toward the totem, therefore, is not iconoclastic hostility or moralism but curatorial solicitude. One might see the new art-historical revaluations of idols and fetishes as a kind of ‘totemizing’ of them, an effort to understand the social-historical contexts, the ritual practices, the belief system and psychological mechanisms that make these images possess so much surplus value. (Mitchell, 2005, p. 100)

In his conception, Mitchell tries to find a third way between iconoclasm and idolatry. He uses it to create a new methodology for analyzing images. As described later, Ernst Friedrich similarly searches for an exit from the dichotomy between iconoclasm and iconophilia and tries to find a way to use images as a political tool.

Of course, these two attitudes – iconoclasm and iconophilia – are only some extremes on the complicated scale of valuing images. Bruno Latour distinguishes five different types of positions along it. They are “The As – People Are Against All Images”, “The Bs – People Are Against Freeze-Frame. Not Against Images”, “The Cs – People Are Not Against Images. Except Those of Their Opponents”, “The Ds – People Are Breaking The Images Unwittingly”, “The Es – People Are Simply The People. They

Mock Iconoclasts and Iconophiles” (Latour, 2002, p. 21-32). In this context, the most interesting are the Bs – those who are not against images but against freeze-frame. The Bs know that it is impossible to get rid of images. But at the same time, they know there is a flow of images and they are against stopping it. They know, as Latour sums up, that “truth is image but there is no image of truth” (Latour, 2002, p. 27). However, he notices that the Bs are in danger of becoming Cs (“People Are Not Against Images. Except Those of Their Opponents”) in disguise. Later in the text it will be shown how Friedrich escapes that threat.

Before focusing on *War against War*, I should make some remarks about why this third way is as important as I think it is. To do so, let us refer again to Mitchell and Rancière. In his theory about iconoclasm and idolatry, Mitchell claims that in criticizing images iconoclasts often miss their target. He writes:

Perhaps the most obvious problem is that the critical exposure and demolition of the nefarious power of images is both easy and ineffectual. Pictures are popular political antagonists because one can take a tough stand on them, and yet, at the end of the day, everything remains pretty much the same. (Mitchell, 2005, p. 33)

There is also another reason why this issue is so important. As Rancière writes, “Art and politics are thereby linked, beneath themselves, as forms of presence of singular bodies in a specific space and time” (Rancière, 2009, p.

26). Politics is based on the distribution of the sensible – deciding who can be represented and how and who cannot. We live in a world made up of politics and images. In practice it is impossible to get rid of images. So, when iconoclasts decide not to create images, they just tap out. They forget that art practices are, as Rancière notices, “‘ways of doing and making’ that intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in the relationship they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility” (Rancière, 2004, p. 13). Images not only reproduce the existing political system but they can also establish a new one. By capturing and rearranging dominant visual representations, it is possible to undermine the system of power hidden behind it. That is how other images are created; images that can be called counter-images because of their origin (they are not fully original but based on images which existed before) and their opposition to the dominant order. Creating counter-images is a powerful weapon in the fight against the prevailing visual representations.

3.

The photos used in *War against War* are not neutral. They are taken from the two regimes of power – the press and archives. The first one is a powerful tool for distributing the sensible. The press creates the image of war based on lies about “the Field of Honour” and “the Heroic Death”. It makes use of photos showing smiling, young men whom the nation can

admire and be proud of. Friedrich uses a lot of pictures of this type, especially at the beginning of *War against War*. They illustrate an early First World War enthusiasm which spread throughout not only Germany but also the whole of Europe. We should not forget about hundreds of thousands of people celebrating the beginning of the war in the streets of Berlin. The joy of war was also, as Friedrich analyses, arranged by the press and by the military character of culture and education. That is why he writes in the manifesto: “And ten newspaper writers that agitate for war, shall be detained as hostages for the life of each single warrior!” (Friedrich, 2017, p. 50). But the reality of war did not resemble the image created by propaganda. Press photos were used to cover the true face of war shown in the photos from archives. It worked because they were the only visual representation of life in the trenches that reached people outside the battlefield. This discrepancy between two images of war best illustrates a part of the book called “The Visage of War”. It contains 24 portrait photos of war veterans – people who, due to their war-related injuries, had to have several facial reconstruction surgeries. Even so, most of them needed lifelong hospitalization. They were also afraid of the shock that their visage may cause their families, so they preferred not to contact loved ones and made them think that they died on the “Field of Honour”. Following Zygmunt Bauman, they can be called “human waste” – people who are no longer useful and have to be taken out of the picture.³ The veterans’ portraits were never meant to be shown

³ See Bauman (2003).

publicly. Images, as a tool of power and distribution of the sensible, are used not only in the case of the press but also in archives. Those in power decide what can be shown but also collect images for themselves – these are two elements of constructing the dominant discourse. Allan Sekula notices that the power of an archive's owner is the power to interpret photos freely and to dictate their meaning.⁴ The owner is the one who decides what story images are going to tell. That is why the Friedrich's move, stealing photos from medical and military archives, is so meaningful. By doing so, he not only reveals something that was meant to be seen only by some narrow group but also frees the images from the domination of their owner. Now, when they are public, they can be used to construct counter-narratives; they become counter-images. Friedrich uses them to give a voice back to those who have been silenced. He describes every photo with a short story of the man shown in it – his name, age, types of injuries and operations he had gone through, sometimes profession. In the shadow of the monumental discourse of "the Field of Honour" and his monumental anti-war history, he creates a space for micro-narrations about individual human beings. But at the same time their stories say more about the faith of the whole war generation and the human condition after the First World War than any other part of *War against War*. These photos are Rancière's "naked images" – they testify to inconceivable physical and emotional pain. But they also testify about others, "human waste", who are not shown, but we know that

⁴ See Sekula (1983).

they are somewhere there. Under one of the photos Friedrich writes:

After the steel bath: To the present day are lying in the hospitals gruesomely disfigured soldiers on whom operations are still being performed. Many of these unhappy war victims have undergone thirty, thirty-five and in some cases more than forty operations. In the case of thousands, the medical treatment has not yet been ended. Very many have to be fed artificially. (Friedrich, 2017, p. 226)

Friedrich believes in the power of these images; he believes in it in spite of all. He writes:

[...] a picture of War, objectively true and faithful to nature, has been photographically recorded for all time. The pictures in this book from page so to the end, show records obtained by the inexorable, incorruptible photographic lens, to the trenches and the mass graves, of 'military lies', of the 'field of honour', and of other 'idylls' of the 'Great Epoch'. And not one single man of any country whatsoever can arise and bear witness against these photographs, that they are untrue and that they do not correspond to realities. (Friedrich, 2017, p. 47-48)

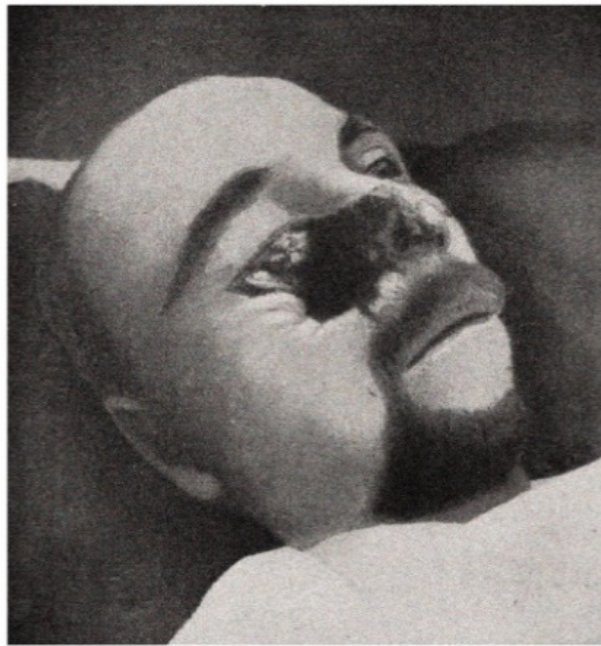
For Friedrich, the basic condition of images is testifying to what has happened. Earlier he writes: "all the treasury of words of all men of all lands suffices not, in the present and in the future, to paint correctly twis butchery of human beings" (Friedrich, 2017, p. 47). Only photography, with its

unique relation to events, can do that. It evokes Roland Barthes' concept of the noeme, the essence, of Photography – “That-has-been” or the Intractable, “it has been here”. Barthes writes in a similar manner to Friedrich:

[...] in Photography I can never deny that the thing has been there. There is a superimposition here: of reality and of the past. And since this constraint exists only for Photography, we must consider it, by reduction, as the very essence, the noeme of Photography. What I intentionalise in a photograph [...] is Reference, which is the founding order of Photography. (Barthes, 1982, p. 76-77)

Friedrich knows that propaganda uses images – that is why he blames journalists in his manifesto and uses photos from archives and the press. But at the same time, he knows how powerful images are because of the nature of photography, which testifies “it has been there”. He tries to give a voice back not only to the people mentioned before but also to the images appropriated by those in power. Because, when they are free, naked images demand from us, as viewers, but also as a society, an ethical response which is, as Friedrich puts it, “the society of Man and Love”.

Na het staalbad: Nog heden ten dage liggen in de hospitalen ontzettend verminkte soldaten, die altijd weer opnieuw geopereerd moeten worden. Velen van deze ongelukkige slachtoffers hebben 30, 35 Operaties, in verschillende gevallen zelfs meer dan 40 operaties doorgemaakt, en de behandeling is by vele duizenden nog niet geeindigd. Zeer velen moeten kunstmatig gevoed worden.



After the steel bath: To the present day are lying in the hospitals gruesomely disfigured soldiers on whom operations are still being performed. Many of these unhappy war victims have undergone thirty, thirty-five and in some cases more than forty operations. In the case of thousands, the medical treatment has not yet been ended. Very many have to be fed artificially.

Figure 5: “After the steel bath: To the present day are lying in the hospitals gruesomely disfigured soldiers on whom operations are still being performed. Many of these unhappy war victims have undergone thirty, thirty-five and in some cases more than forty operations. In the case of thousands, the medical treatment has not yet been ended. Very many have to be fed artificially” (Friedrich, 2017, p. 226)

Landaarbeider, 36 jaar oud, gewond in 1917. Neus en linker wang ver-
vangen met vleesch, uit hoofd borst en arm. (20 Operaties.)

Agricultural worker, 36 years of age. Wounded 1917. Nose and left cheek
restored with flesh from head, breast and arm. (20 operations.)



Landwirtschaftlicher Arbeiter, 36 Jahre alt. Verwundet 1917. Nase und
linke Wange ersetzt aus Fleisch von Kopf, Brust und Arm.
(20 Operationen.)

Agriculteur, 36 ans, blessé en 1917. Le nez et la joue gauche restitués
par la chair de la tête, de la poitrine et du bras (20 opérations).

Pracownik rolny, 36 lat. Ranny w 1917. Nos i lewy policzek przywrócony
z tkanek pobranych z głowy, piersi i ramion. 20 operacji.

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Figure 6: “Agricultural worker, 36 years of age. Wounded 1917. Nose and left cheek restored with flesh from head, breast and arm. (20 operations.)” (Friedrich, 2017, p. 229)

4.

Ernst Friedrich is, then, not an iconoclast. But at the same time, he is not an iconophile either. To show that, let us get back to Latour's five categories of iconoclasts. It may seem that Friedrich is a type C – he is not against images, only against those of his opponents. But it turns out to be more complicated. Friedrich criticizes the picture of war created by propaganda, but at the same time he uses images created by his opponents. Most of the images in *War against War* come from the state – from the press or archives. Hence, the problem lies not in the images themselves but in the way they are used by those in power. That is why Friedrich represents the Bs – people against freeze-frames, not against images. The “Field of Honour” and propaganda pictures are freeze-frame images. They have one imposed meaning and one way of being interpreted. Friedrich does not oppose some other photo to them; he does not create a symbol for the war against war. What is even more interesting, he does not create a visual representation for his future utopia of “Man and Love” either. Instead he liquefies images. He uses over 250 photos to show the scale of the damages of war. It seems that Friedrich knows that, as Latour writes, “truth is image but there is no image of truth”. *War against War* is a montage in which images clash together. We may call it, following Latour and Mitchell, the “iconoclash” – the war between images. Friedrich clashes two different

types of photos – those from the press and archives. At first glance, viewers may say which is which. Press pictures show soldiers fulfilling their duties – marching, saluting, fighting. Healthy young men ready to crush the enemy. Their bodies are freeze-framed, tight and sorted similarly to the image itself. On the other hand, there are counter-images of dead bodies mixed with mud and dead horses. Often it is impossible to tell who is who. They represent fluid, organic matter which is impossible to frame or to stop. This juxtaposition could be an illustration for Klaus Theweleit's book *Male Fantasies* (1987). Referring to Theweleit and his analyses of fascism, we may say that the Weimar Republic was against and afraid of these counter-images. *War against War* causes a shock because it shows what is hidden behind the propaganda picture. It can, as we can describe it following Rancière, "reveal one world behind another [...]. It involves organizing a clash, presenting the strangeness of the familiar, in order to reveal a different order of measurement that is only uncovered by the violence of a conflict" (Rancière, 2007, p. 82-83). Rancière writes that shock is a strategy typical of montage works and distinguishes two different types – dialectic and symbolic. The first puts together that which is incompatible, the second creates connections between that which seems completely different. In art they both mix. The same happens in *War against War*. Archive photos are even aesthetically incompatible with propaganda photos. On the other hand, viewers know that they both illustrate the reality of war. These two types of images are completely different but at the same time they are reverse and

obverse of the same.

The term “iconoclasm” also has another meaning than what was presented earlier. Latour describes it: “Iconoclasm [...] is when one does not know, one hesitates, one is troubled by an action for which there is no way to know, without further inquiry, whether it is destructive or constructive” (Latour, 2002, p. 14). This hesitation can also be seen in Friedrich’s project. The montage in *War against War* reveals the dark side of images. How deadly a weapon they can be if they are used and appropriated by those in power, who Friedrich calls profiteers, deceivers, oppressors, torturers, the well-fed or, in short, capitalists. The photos testifying to war’s horrors show the consequences of people having believed in the propaganda picture of war – consequences of their enthusiasm and eagerness to fight. This double nature of Friedrich’s attitude to photography shown in *War against War* means that the montage used in it is dialectical. The dialectical montage does not create synthesis but, as Didi-Huberman writes, it “expose the truth by disorganizing, and therefore by complicating while implicating (rather than explicating) things” (Didi-Huberman, 2018, p. 85). Friedrich does not have an easy answer to questions about the nature of images. But knowing their power, that they can be used both to fetishize the war or to testify to its horrors and demystify the myth of the “Field of Honour”, he cannot just withdraw them.

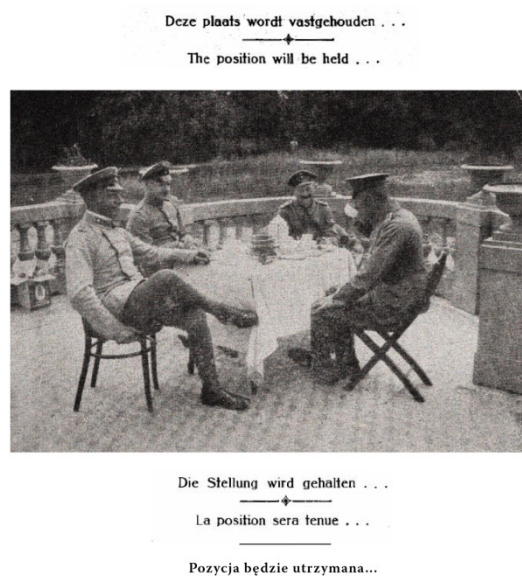


Figure 7: “The position will be held...” (Friedrich, 2017, p. 106)

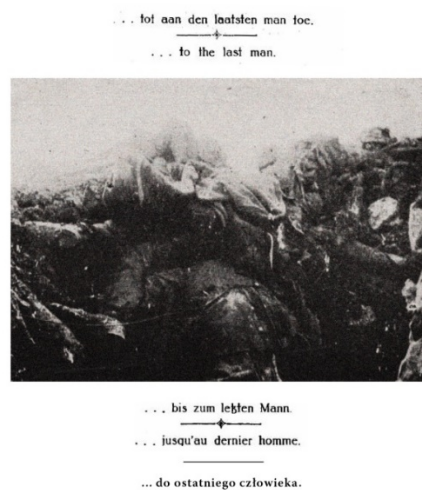


Figure 8: “... to the last man” (Friedrich, 2017, p. 107)



Figure 9: “Shooting under martial law. a) ‘I hold here only an office and no opinion.’ (Schiller)” (Friedrich, 2017, p. 176)

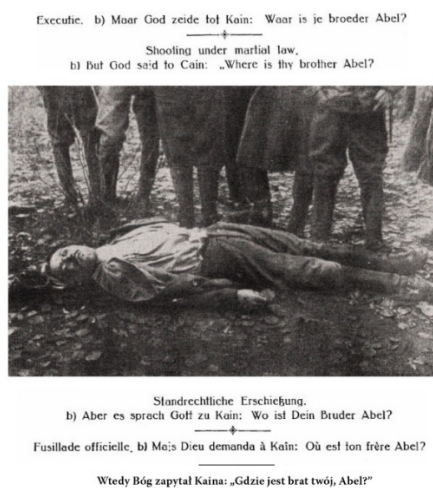


Figure 10: “Shooting under martial law. b) But God said to Cain: ‘Where is thy brother Abel?’” (Friedrich, 2017, p. 177)

5.

Ernst Friedrich, similarly to Mitchell, tries to find a third way of dealing with images, which is neither iconoclasm nor iconophilia. This third way is analogical to Mitchell's totemism, which tries to analyze images and understand why they have such an overwhelming power. Friedrich's project can be divided into a few phases. Firstly, he recognizes the deadly potential of images used by those in power to create, through the press, discourses about war based on myths of the "Field of Honour" and the "Heroic Death". In the next step, he tries to recover appropriated war images. By freeing photos from state archives, he redistributes the sensible – represents that which was not supposed to be shown. These images, showing the horrors of the First World War, testify about this and those who have been forgotten in the propagandist narration. In *War against War*, Friedrich clashes two types of photos – images and counter-images. His montage shows the double potential of images, which can create the dominant discourse or be used in the fight against it. He tries to use images – in contrast to Mitchell, he is concerned less about theory and more about practice. *War against War* is a project between philosophy, art and politics. As such it can contribute to discussions about iconophilia and iconoclasm in all of these three fields and try to find strategies which combine both these attitudes.

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