DIOGENES

Diogenes 201: 113–118
ISSN 0392-1921

Memory as a Freeze-Frame: Extracts from 'Looking at War'

Susan Sontag

The war America waged in Vietnam, the first to be witnessed day after day by television cameras, introduced the home front to a new intimacy with death and destruction. Ever since, battles and massacres filmed as they unfold have been a routine ingredient of the ceaseless flow of domestic, small-screen entertainment. Creating a perch for a particular conflict in the consciousness of viewers exposed to dramas from everywhere requires the daily diffusion and rediffusion of snippets of footage about the conflict. The understanding of war among people who have not experienced war is now chiefly a product of the impact of these images.

Non-stop imagery (television, streaming video, movies) surrounds us, but, when it comes to remembering, the photograph has the deeper bite. Memory freeze-frames; its basic unit is the single image. In an era of information overload, the photograph provides a quick way of apprehending something and a compact form for memorizing it. The photograph is like a quotation, or a maxim or proverb. Each of us mentally stocks hundreds of photographs, subject to instant recall. Cite the most famous photograph taken during the Spanish Civil War, the Republican soldier 'shot' by Robert Capa's camera at the same moment he is hit by an enemy bullet, and virtually everyone who has heard of that war can summon to mind the grainy black-and-white image of a man in a white shirt with rolled-up sleeves collapsing backward on a hillock, his right arm flung behind him as his rifle leaves his grip – about to fall, dead, onto his own shadow.

It is a shocking image, and that is the point. Conscripted as part of journalism, images were expected to arrest attention, startle, surprise. As the old advertising slogan of *Paris Match*, founded in 1949, had it: 'The weight of words, the shock of photos.' The hunt for more dramatic – as they're often described – images drives the photographic enterprise, and is part of the normality of a culture in which shock has become a leading stimulus of consumption and source of value. 'Beauty will be convulsive, or it will not be,' André Breton proclaimed. He called this aesthetic ideal

Copyright © Susan Sontag 2002
SAGE: London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi, www.sagepublications.com
DOI: 10.1177/0392192104041697

https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192104041697 Published online by Cambridge University Press

'surrealist,' but, in a culture radically revamped by the ascendancy of mercantile values, to ask that images be jarring, clamorous, eye-opening, seems like elementary realism or good business sense. How else to get attention for one's product or one's art? How else to make a dent when there is incessant exposure to images, and over-exposure to a handful of images seen again and again? The image as shock and the image as cliché are two aspects of the same presence.

*

The memory of war, however, like all memory, is mostly local. Armenians, the majority in diaspora, keep alive the memory of the Armenian genocide of 1915; Greeks don't forget the sanguinary civil war in Greece that raged through most of the second half of the nineteen-forties. But for a war to break out of its immediate constituency and become a subject of international attention it must be regarded as something of an exception, as wars go, and represent more than the clashing interests of the belligerents themselves. Apart from the major world conflicts, most wars do not acquire the requisite fuller meaning. An example: the Chaco War (1932–35), a butchery engaged in by Bolivia (population one million) and Paraguay (three and a half million) that took the lives of a hundred thousand soldiers, and which was covered by a German photojournalist, Willi Ruge, whose superb close-up battle pictures are as forgotten as that war. But the Spanish Civil War, in the second half of the nineteen-thirties, the Serb and Croat wars against Bosnia in the mid-nineties, the drastic worsening of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that began in 2000 – these relatively small wars were guaranteed the attention of many cameras because they were invested with the meaning of larger struggles: the Spanish Civil War because it was a stand against the Fascist menace, and was understood to be a dress rehearsal for the coming European, or 'world,' war; the Bosnian war because it was the stand of a small, fledgling European country wishing to remain multicultural as well as independent against the dominant power in the region and its neo-Fascist program of ethnic cleansing; and the conflict in the Middle East because the United States supports the State of Israel.

*

It seems that the appetite for pictures showing bodies in pain is almost as keen as the desire for ones that show bodies naked. For a long time, in Christian art, depictions of Hell offered both of these elemental satisfactions. On occasion, the pretext might be a Biblical decapitation story (Holofernes, John the Baptist) or massacre yarn (the newborn Hebrew boys, the eleven thousand virgins) or some such, with the status of a real historical event and of an implacable fate. There was also the repertoire of hard-to-look-at cruelties from classical antiquity – the pagan myths, even more than the Christian stories, offer something for every taste. No moral charge attaches to the representation of these cruelties. Just the provocation: Can you look at this? There is the satisfaction at being able to look at the image without flinching. There is the pleasure of flinching.

To shudder at Goltzius's rendering, in his etching 'The Dragon Devouring the

https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192104041697 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Companions of Cadmus' (1588), of a man's face being chewed off his head is very different from shuddering at a photograph of a First World War veteran whose face has been shot away. One horror has its place in a complex subject – figures in a landscape – that displays the artist's skill of eye and hand. The other is a camera's record, from very near, of a real person's unspeakably awful mutilation; that and nothing else. An invented horror can be quite overwhelming. (I, for one, find it difficult to look at Titian's great painting of the flaying of Marsyas, or, indeed, at any picture of this subject.) But there is shame as well as shock in looking at the closeup of a real horror. Perhaps the only people with the right to look at images of suffering of this extreme order are those who could do something to alleviate it – say, the surgeons at the military hospital where the photograph was taken – or those who could learn from it. The rest of us are voyeurs, whether we like it or not.

*

The problem is not that people remember through photographs but that they remember only the photographs. This remembering through photographs eclipses other forms of understanding – and remembering. The concentration camps – that is, the photographs taken when the camps were liberated, in 1945 – are most of what people associate with Nazism and the miseries of the Second World War. Hideous deaths (by genocide, starvation, and epidemic) are most of what people retain of the clutch of iniquities and failures that have taken place in postcolonial Africa.

To remember is, more and more, not to recall a story but to be able to call up a picture. Even a writer as steeped in nineteenth-century and early-modern literary solemnities as W. G. Sebald was moved to seed his lamentation-narratives of lost lives, lost nature, lost cityscapes with photographs. Sebald was not just an elegist; he was a militant elegist. Remembering, he wanted the reader to remember, too.

*

Harrowing photographs do not inevitably lose their power to shock. But they don't help us much to understand. Narratives can make us understand. Photographs do something else: they haunt us. Consider one of the most unforgettable images of the war in Bosnia, a photograph of which the *New York Times* foreign correspondent John Kifner wrote, 'The image is stark, one of the most enduring of the Balkan wars: a Serb militiaman casually kicking a dying Muslim woman in the head. It tells you everything you need to know.' But of course it doesn't tell us everything we need to know.

From the identification supplied by the photographer, Ron Haviv, we learn that the photograph was taken in the town of Bijeljina in April, 1992, the first month of the Serb rampage through Bosnia. From behind, we see a uniformed Serb soldier, a youthful figure with sunglasses perched on the top of his head, a cigarette between the second and third fingers of his raised left hand, rifle dangling in his right hand, right leg poised to kick a woman lying face down on the sidewalk between two other bodies. The photograph doesn't tell us that she is Muslim, but she is not likely to have been labelled in any other way, or why would she and the two others be lying

https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192104041697 Published online by Cambridge University Press

there, as if dead (why 'dying'?), under the gaze of some Serb soldiers? In fact, the photograph tells us very little – except that war is hell, and that graceful young men with guns are capable of kicking in the head overweight older women lying helpless, or already killed.

The pictures of Bosnian atrocities were seen soon after they took place. Like pictures from the Vietnam War, such as Ron Haberle's documents of the massacre by a company of American soldiers of some five hundred unarmed civilians in the village of My Lai in March 1968, they became important in bolstering indignation at this war which had been far from inevitable, far from intractable; and could have been stopped much sooner. Therefore one could feel an obligation to look at these pictures, gruesome as they were, because there was something to be done, right now, about what they depicted. Other issues are raised when the public is invited to respond to a dossier of hitherto unknown pictures of horrors long past.

An example: a trove of photographs of black victims of lynching in small towns in the United States between the 1890s and the 1930s, which provided a shattering, revelatory experience for the thousands who saw them in a gallery in New York in 2000. The lynching pictures tell us about human wickedness. About inhumanity. They force us to think about the extent of the evil unleashed specifically by racism. Intrinsic to the perpetration of this evil is the shamelessness of photographing it. The pictures were taken as souvenirs and made, some of them, into postcards; more than a few show grinning spectators, good churchgoing citizens, as most of them had to be, posing for a camera with the backdrop of a naked, charred, mutilated body hanging from a tree. The display of the pictures makes us spectators, too.

What is the point of exhibiting these pictures? To awaken indignation? To make us feel 'bad'; that is, to appall and sadden? To help us mourn? Is looking at such pictures really necessary, given that these horrors lie in a past remote enough to be beyond punishment? Are we the better for seeing these images? Do they actually teach us anything? Don't they rather just confirm what we already know (or want to know)?

All these questions were raised at the time of the exhibition and afterward when a book of the photographs, *Without Sanctuary*, was published. Some people, it was said, might dispute the need for this grisly photographic display, lest it cater to voyeuristic appetites and perpetuate images of black victimization – or simply numb the mind. Nevertheless, it was argued, there is an obligation to 'examine' – the more clinical 'examine' is substituted for 'look at' – the pictures. It was further argued that submitting to the ordeal should help us understand such atrocities not as the acts of 'barbarians' but as the reflection of a belief system, racism, that by defining one people as less human than another legitimatizes torture and murder. But maybe they *were* barbarians. Maybe *this* is what barbarians look like. (They look like everybody else).

That being said, whom do we wish to blame? More precisely, whom do we believe we have the right to blame? The children of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were no less innocent than the young African-American men (and a few women) who were butchered and hanged from trees in small-town America. More than a hundred thousand German civilians, three-fourths of them women, were incinerated in the R.A.F. fire bombing of Dresden on the night of February 13, 1945; seventy-two

https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192104041697 Published online by Cambridge University Press

thousand civilians were killed by the American bomb dropped on Hiroshima. The roll call could be much longer. Again, whom do we wish to blame? What atrocities from the incurable past do we think we are obliged to see?

Probably, if we are Americans, we think that it would be 'morbid' to go out of our way to look at pictures of burned victims of atomic bombing or the napalmed flesh of the civilian victims of the American war on Vietnam but that we have some kind of duty to look at the lynching pictures – if we belong to the party of the right-thinking, which on this issue is now large. A stepped-up recognition of the monstrousness of the slave system that once existed, unquestioned by most, in the United States is a national project of recent decades that many Euro-Americans feel some tug of obligation to join. This ongoing project is a great achievement, a benchmark of civic virtue. But acknowledgment of American use of disproportionate firepower in war (in violation of one of the cardinal laws of war) is very much not a national project. A museum devoted to the history of America's wars that included the vicious war the United States fought against guerrillas in the Philippines from 1899 to 1902 (expertly excoriated by Mark Twain), and that fairly presented the arguments for and against using the atomic bomb in 1945 on the Japanese cities, with photographic evidence that showed what those weapons did, would be regarded – now more than ever – as an unpatriotic endeavor.

*

Since *On Photography* was published, many critics have suggested that the agonies of war – thanks to television – have devolved into a nightly banality. Flooded with images of the sort that once used to shock and arouse indignation, we are losing our capacity to react. Compassion, stretched to its limits, is going numb. So runs the familiar diagnosis. But what is really being asked for here? That images of carnage be cut back to, say, once a week? More generally, that we work toward an 'ecology of images,' as I suggested in *On Photography*? But there *isn't* going to be an ecology of images. No Committee of Guardians is going to ration horror, to keep fresh its ability to shock. And the horrors themselves are not going to abate.

The view proposed in *On Photography* – that our capacity to respond to our experiences with emotional freshness and ethical pertinence is being sapped by the relentless diffusion of vulgar and appalling images – might be called the conservative critique of the diffusion of such images. I call this argument 'conservative' because it is the sense of reality that is eroded. There is still a reality that exists independent of the attempts to weaken its authority. The argument is in fact a defense of reality and the imperiled standards for responding to it more fully. In the more radical – cynical – spin on this critique, there is nothing to defend, for, paradoxical as it may sound, there is no reality anymore. The vast maw of modernity has chewed up reality and spat the whole mess out as images. According to a highly influential analysis, we live in a 'society of spectacle.' Each thing has to be turned into a spectacle to be real – that is, interesting – to us. People themselves become images: celebrities. Reality has abdicated. There are only representations: media.

Fancy rhetoric, this. And very persuasive to many, because one of the characteristics of modernity is that people like to feel they can anticipate their own experience.

https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192104041697 Published online by Cambridge University Press

(This view is associated in particular with the writings of the late Guy Debord, who thought he was describing an illusion, a hoax, and of Jean Baudrillard, who claims to believe that images, simulated realities, are all that exists now; it seems to be something of a French specialty.) It is common to say that war, like everything else that seems to be real, is *médiatique*. This was the diagnosis of several distinguished French day-trippers to Sarajevo during the siege, among them André Glucksmann: that the war would be won or lost not by anything that happened in Sarajevo, or Bosnia generally, but by what happened in the media. It is often asserted that 'the West' has increasingly come to see war itself as a spectacle. Reports of the death of reality – like the death of reason, the death of the intellectual, the death of serious literature – seem to have been accepted without much reflection by many who are attempting to understand what feels wrong, or empty, or idiotically triumphant in contemporary politics and culture.

To speak of reality becoming a spectacle is a breathtaking provincialism. It universalizes the viewing habits of a small, educated population living in the rich part of the world, where news has been converted into entertainment – a mature style of viewing that is a prime acquisition of the 'modern,' and a prerequisite for dismantling traditional forms of party-based politics that offer real disagreement and debate. It assumes that everyone is a spectator. It suggests, perversely, un-seriously, that there is no real suffering in the world. But it is absurd to identify 'the world' with those zones in the rich countries where people have the dubious privilege of being spectators, or of declining to be spectators, of other people's pain, just as it is absurd to generalize about the ability to respond to the sufferings of others on the basis of the mind-set of those consumers of news who know nothing at first hand about war and terror. There are hundreds of millions of television watchers who are far from inured to what they see on television. They do not have the luxury of patronizing reality.

Susan Sontag
New York

Selections by Frances Albernaz and Paola Costa Giovangigli

Note

It was not possible to publish a direct translation of the French article that appears in *Diogène* 201. That article drew on an earlier discussion by Sontag of ideas she subsequently developed and published in her book *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, March 2003) and in an article in *The New Yorker* ('Looking at War: Photography's View of Devastation and Death', December 2002). We present here some extracts from the latter work.

https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192104041697 Published online by Cambridge University Press