

REGARDING  
THE PAIN  
OF OTHERS

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Susan Sontag

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**T**o catch a death actually happening and embalm it for all time is something only cameras can do, and pictures taken by photographers out in the field of the moment of (or just before) death are among the most celebrated and often reproduced of war photographs. There can be no suspicion about the authenticity of what is being shown in the picture taken by Eddie Adams in February 1968 of the chief of the South Vietnamese national police, Brigadier General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, shooting a Vietcong suspect in a street in Saigon. Nevertheless, it was staged—by General Loan, who had led the prisoner, hands tied behind his back, out to the street where journalists had gathered; he would not have carried out the summary execution there had they not been available to witness it. Positioned beside his prisoner so

that his profile and the prisoner's face were visible to the cameras behind him, Loan aimed point-blank. Adams's picture shows the moment the bullet has been fired; the dead man, grimacing, has not started to fall. As for the viewer, this viewer, even many years after the picture was taken . . . well, one can gaze at these faces for a long time and not come to the end of the mystery, and the indecency, of such co-spectatorship.

More upsetting is the opportunity to look at people who know they have been condemned to die: the cache of six thousand photographs taken between 1975 and 1979 at a secret prison in a former high school in Tuol Sleng, a suburb of Phnom Penh, the killing house of more than fourteen thousand Cambodians charged with being either "intellectuals" or "counter-revolutionaries"—the documentation of this atrocity courtesy of the Khmer Rouge record keepers, who had each sit for a photograph just before being executed.\* A selection of these pictures in a book titled *The Killing Fields* makes it possible, decades later, to stare back at the faces staring into the camera—therefore at us. The Spanish Republican soldier has just died, if we may believe the claim made for that picture,

\*Photographing political prisoners and alleged counter-revolutionaries just before their execution was also standard practice in the Soviet Union in the 1930s and 1940s, as recent research into the NKVD files in the Baltic and Ukrainian archives, as well as the central Lubyanka archives, has disclosed.

which Capa took at some distance from his subject: we see no more than a grainy figure, a body and head, an energy, swerving from the camera as he falls. These Cambodian women and men of all ages, including many children, photographed from a few feet away, usually in half figure, are—as in Titian's *The Flaying of Marsyas*, where Apollo's knife is eternally about to descend—forever looking at death, forever about to be murdered, forever wronged. And the viewer is in the same position as the lackey behind the camera; the experience is sickening. The prison photographer's name is known—Nhem Ein—and can be cited. Those he photographed, with their stunned faces, their emaciated torsos, the number tags pinned to the top of their shirts, remain an aggregate: anonymous victims.

And even if named, unlikely to be known to “us.” When Woolf notes that one of the photographs she has been sent shows a corpse of a man or woman so mangled that it could as well be that of a dead pig, her point is that the scale of war's murderousness destroys what identifies people as individuals, even as human beings. This, of course, is how war looks when it is seen from afar, as an image.

Victims, grieving relatives, consumers of news—all have their own nearness to or distance from war. The frankest representations of war, and of disaster-injured

bodies, are of those who seem most foreign, therefore least likely to be known. With subjects closer to home, the photographer is expected to be more discreet.

When, in October 1862, a month after the battle of Antietam, photographs taken by Gardner and O'Sullivan were exhibited at Brady's Manhattan gallery, *The New York Times* commented:

The living that throng Broadway care little perhaps for the Dead at Antietam, but we fancy they would jostle less carelessly down the great thoroughfare, saunter less at their ease, were a few dripping bodies, fresh from the field, laid along the pavement. There would be a gathering up of skirts and a careful picking of way . . .

Concurring in the perennial charge that those whom war spares are callously indifferent to the sufferings beyond their purview did not make the reporter less ambivalent about the immediacy of the photograph.

The dead of the battlefield come to us very rarely even in dreams. We see the list in the morning paper at breakfast but dismiss its recollection with the coffee. But Mr. Brady has done something to bring home to us the terrible reality and earnestness of war. If he has not brought bodies and laid them in our dooryards and along the streets, he

has done something very like it . . . These pictures have a terrible distinctness. By the aid of the magnifying-glass, the very features of the slain may be distinguished. We would scarce choose to be in the gallery, when one of the women bending over them should recognize a husband, a son, or a brother in the still, lifeless lines of bodies, that lie ready for the gaping trenches.

Admiration is mixed with disapproval of the pictures for the pain they might give the female relatives of the dead. The camera brings the viewer close, too close; supplemented by a magnifying glass—for this is a double-lens story—the “terrible distinctness” of the pictures gives unnecessary, indecent information. Yet the *Times* reporter cannot resist the melodrama that mere words supply (the “dripping bodies” ready for “the gaping trenches”), while reprehending the intolerable realism of the image.

New demands are made on reality in the era of cameras. The real thing may not be fearsome enough, and therefore needs to be enhanced; or reenacted more convincingly. Thus, the first newsreel ever made of a battle—a much-publicized incident in Cuba during the Spanish-American War of 1898 known as the Battle of San Juan Hill—in fact shows a charge staged shortly afterward by Colonel Theodore Roosevelt and his volunteer cavalry unit, the Rough Riders, for the Vitagraph cameramen,

the actual charge up the hill, after it was filmed, having been judged insufficiently dramatic. Or the images may be too terrible, and need to be suppressed in the name of propriety or of patriotism—like the images showing, without appropriate partial concealment, our dead. To display the dead, after all, is what the enemy does. In the Boer War (1899–1902), after their victory at Spion Kop in January 1900, the Boers thought it would be morale-building for their own troops to circulate a horrifying picture of dead British soldiers. Taken by an unknown Boer photographer ten days after the British defeat, which had cost the lives of thirteen hundred of their soldiers, it gives an intrusive view down a long shallow trench packed with unburied bodies. What is particularly aggressive about the image is the absence of a landscape. The trench's receding jumble of bodies fills the whole picture space. British indignation upon hearing of this latest Boer outrage was keen, if stiffly expressed: to have made public such pictures, declared *Amateur Photographer*, “serves no useful purpose and appeals to the morbid side of human nature solely.”

There had always been censorship, but for a long time it remained desultory, at the pleasure of generals and heads of state. The first organized ban on press photography at the front came during the First World War; both the German and French high commands allowed only a



few selected military photographers near the fighting. (Censorship of the press by the British General Staff was less inflexible.) And it took another fifty years, and the relaxation of censorship with the first televised war coverage, to understand what impact shocking photographs could have on the domestic public. During the Vietnam era, war photography became, normatively, a criticism of war. This was bound to have consequences: mainstream media are not in the business of making people feel queasy about the struggles for which they are being mobilized, much less of disseminating propaganda against waging war.

Since then, censorship—the most extensive kind, self-censorship, as well as censorship imposed by the military—has found a large and influential number of apologists. At the start of the British campaign in the Falklands in April 1982, the government of Margaret Thatcher granted access to only two photojournalists—among those refused was a master war photographer, Don McCullin—and only three batches of film reached London before the islands were recaptured in May. No direct television transmission was permitted. There had not been such drastic restrictions on the reporting of a British military operation since the Crimean War. It proved harder for the American authorities to duplicate the Thatcher controls on the reporting of their own foreign adventures. What

the American military promoted during the Gulf War in 1991 were images of the techno war: the sky above the dying, filled with light-traces of missiles and shells—images that illustrated America's absolute military superiority over its enemy. American television viewers weren't allowed to see footage acquired by NBC (which the network then declined to run) of what that superiority could wreak: the fate of thousands of Iraqi conscripts who, having fled Kuwait City at the end of the war, on February 27, were carpet bombed with explosives, napalm, radioactive DU (depleted uranium) rounds, and cluster bombs as they headed north, in convoys and on foot, on the road to Basra, Iraq—a slaughter notoriously described by one American officer as a “turkey shoot.” And most American operations in Afghanistan in late 2001 were off-limits to news photographers.

The terms for allowing the use of cameras at the front for nonmilitary purposes have become much stricter as war has become an activity prosecuted with increasingly exact optical devices for tracking the enemy. There is no war without photography, that notable aesthete of war Ernst Jünger observed in 1930, thereby refining the irrepressible identification of the camera and the gun, “shooting” a subject and shooting a human being. War-making and picture-taking are congruent activities: “It is

the same intelligence, whose weapons of annihilation can locate the enemy to the exact second and meter,” wrote Jünger, “that labors to preserve the great historical event in fine detail.”\*

The preferred current American way of war-making has expanded on this model. Television, whose access to the scene is limited by government controls and by self-censorship, serves up the war as images. The war itself is waged as much as possible at a distance, through bombing, whose targets can be chosen, on the basis of instantly relayed information and visualizing technology, from continents away: the daily bombing operations in Afghanistan in late 2001 and early 2002 were directed from U.S. Central Command in Tampa, Florida. The aim is to produce a sufficiently punishing number of casualties on the other side while minimizing opportunities for the enemy to inflict any casualties at all; American and allied soldiers who die in vehicle accidents or from

\*Thus, thirteen years before the destruction of Guernica, Arthur Harris, later the chief of Bombing Command in the Royal Air Force during the Second World War, then a young RAF squadron leader in Iraq, described the air campaign to crush the rebellious natives in this newly acquired British colony, complete with photographic proof of the success of the mission. “The Arab and the Kurd,” he wrote in 1924, “now know what real bombing means in casualties and damage; they now know that within forty-five minutes a full-sized village (vide attached photos of Kushan-Al-Ajaza) can be practically wiped out and a third of its inhabitants killed by four or five machines which offer them no real target, no opportunity for glory as warriors, no effective means of escape.”

“friendly fire” (as the euphemism has it) both count and don’t count.

In the era of tele-controlled warfare against innumerable enemies of American power, policies about what is to be seen and not seen by the public are still being worked out. Television news producers and newspaper and magazine photo editors make decisions every day which firm up the wavering consensus about the boundaries of public knowledge. Often their decisions are cast as judgments about “good taste”—always a repressive standard when invoked by institutions. Staying within the bounds of good taste was the primary reason given for not showing any of the horrific pictures of the dead taken at the site of the World Trade Center in the immediate aftermath of the attack on September 11, 2001. (Tabloids are usually bolder than broadsheet papers in printing grisly images; a picture of a severed hand lying in the rubble of the World Trade Center ran in one late edition of New York’s *Daily News* shortly after the attack; it seems not to have appeared in any other paper.) And television news, with its much larger audience and therefore greater responsiveness to pressures from advertisers, operates under even stricter, for the most part self-policed constraints on what is “proper” to air. This novel insistence on good taste in a culture saturated with commercial incentives to lower standards of taste may be

puzzling. But it makes sense if understood as obscuring a host of concerns and anxieties about public order and public morale that cannot be named, as well as pointing to the inability otherwise to formulate or defend traditional conventions of how to mourn. What can be shown, what should not be shown—few issues arouse more public clamor.

The other argument often used to suppress pictures cites the rights of relatives. When a weekly newspaper in Boston briefly posted online a propaganda video made in Pakistan that showed the “confession” (that he was Jewish) and subsequent ritual slaughter of the kidnapped American journalist Daniel Pearl in Karachi in early 2002, a vehement debate took place in which the right of Pearl’s widow to be spared more pain was pitted against the newspaper’s right to print and post what it saw fit and the public’s right to see. The video was quickly taken offline. Notably, both sides treated the three and a half minutes of horror only as a snuff film. Nobody could have learned from the debate that the video had other footage, a montage of stock accusations (for instance, images of Ariel Sharon sitting with George W. Bush at the White House, Palestinian children killed in Israeli attacks), that it was a political diatribe and ended with dire threats and a list of specific demands—all of which might suggest that it was worth suffering through (if you could bear it)

to confront better the particular viciousness and intransigence of the forces that murdered Pearl. It is easier to think of the enemy as just a savage who kills, then holds up the head of his prey for all to see.

With our dead, there has always been a powerful interdiction against showing the naked face. The photographs taken by Gardner and O'Sullivan still shock because the Union and Confederate soldiers lie on their backs, with the faces of some clearly visible. American soldiers fallen on the battlefield were not shown again in a major publication for many wars, not, indeed, until the taboo-shattering picture by George Strock that *Life* published in September 1943—it had initially been withheld by the military censors—of three soldiers killed on the beach during a landing in New Guinea. (Though “Dead GIs on Buna Beach” is invariably described as showing three soldiers lying face down in the wet sand, one of the three lies on his back, but the angle from which the picture was taken conceals his head.) By the time of the landing in France—June 6, 1944—photographs of anonymous American casualties had appeared in a number of news-magazines, always prone or shrouded or with their faces turned away. This is a dignity not thought necessary to accord to others.

The more remote or exotic the place, the more likely we are to have full frontal views of the dead and dying.

Thus postcolonial Africa exists in the consciousness of the general public in the rich world—besides through its sexy music—mainly as a succession of unforgettable photographs of large-eyed victims, starting with figures in the famine lands of Biafra in the late 1960s to the survivors of the genocide of nearly a million Rwandan Tutsis in 1994 and, a few years later, the children and adults whose limbs were hacked off during the program of mass terror conducted by the RUF, the rebel forces in Sierra Leone. (More recently, the photographs are of whole families of indigent villagers dying of AIDS.) These sights carry a double message. They show a suffering that is outrageous, unjust, and should be repaired. They confirm that this is the sort of thing which happens in that place. The ubiquity of those photographs, and those horrors, cannot help but nourish belief in the inevitability of tragedy in the benighted or backward—that is, poor—parts of the world.

Comparable cruelties and misfortunes used to take place in Europe, too; cruelties that surpass in volume and luridness anything we might be shown now from the poor parts of the world occurred in Europe only sixty years ago. But horror seems to have vacated Europe, vacated it for long enough to make the present pacified state of affairs seem inevitable. (That there could be death camps and a siege and civilians slaughtered by the thousands

and thrown into mass graves on European soil fifty years after the end of the Second World War gave the war in Bosnia and the Serb campaign of killing in Kosovo their special, anachronistic interest. But one of the main ways of understanding the war crimes committed in southeastern Europe in the 1990s has been to say that the Balkans, after all, were never really part of Europe.) Generally, the grievously injured bodies shown in published photographs are from Asia or Africa. This journalistic custom inherits the centuries-old practice of exhibiting exotic—that is, colonized—human beings: Africans and denizens of remote Asian countries were displayed like zoo animals in ethnological exhibitions mounted in London, Paris, and other European capitals from the sixteenth until the early twentieth century. In *The Tempest*, Trinculo's first thought upon coming across Caliban is that he could be put on exhibit in England: "not a holiday fool there but would give a piece of silver . . . When they will not give a doit to relieve a lame beggar, they will lay out ten to see a dead Indian." The exhibition in photographs of cruelties inflicted on those with darker complexions in exotic countries continues this offering, oblivious to the considerations that deter such displays of our own victims of violence; for the other, even when not an enemy, is regarded only as someone to be seen, not someone (like us) who also sees. But surely the wounded Taliban soldier



begging for his life whose fate was pictured prominently in *The New York Times* also had a wife, children, parents, sisters and brothers, some of whom may one day come across the three color photographs of their husband, father, son, brother being slaughtered—if they have not already seen them.