Camera War, Again

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In her final book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag (2003) drew attention to the long-standing relationship between photography and modern war. Sontag was certainly not the first to suggest we wage war with pictures, but her book showed that the connection has become definitive: one can no longer talk about war without talking about the presentation of war.

Despite this awareness, I never cease to be surprised by the pictures I encounter in the news. The war in Iraq has undoubtedly produced some of the most dreadful entries in the history of camera war. The torture photographs from Abu Ghraib come to mind, of course, but I find the pictures of the dead just as disturbing. Some of the first images of this kind arrived in the summer of 2003 with the American Provisional Authority's release of photographs of the battered and bloodied bodies of Saddam Hussein's sons, Uday and Qusay. The images were supposedly to provide Iraqis with confirmation of their deaths, or perhaps more ideologically, to suggest that the old regime had come to an end. This parading of the dead was followed by Associated Press photographer Khalid Mohammed's photograph in which burnt remains of several American civilian contractors hang gracelessly from a bridge in Fallujah. Although Sontag drew a connection to the history of American lynching photographs in regards to the Abu Ghraib images (which appeared just a month later), I think Mohammed's photograph from Fallujah strikes a stronger resonance to this past: a rowdy crowd looking for recognition from the camera, charred bodies swinging from the end of a rope, the sheer furor of the moment captured in an image. Then came Abu Ghraib. Then came the grisly, low-res beheading of Nick Berg. One shudders to think what will come next.

No doubt each of these made-for-camera events deserves individual examination, but as Sontag points out, what is also significant is that such images appear to have a common impact on spectators. When we encounter atrocity photographs something of a persistent split occurs between being affected and being able to think and understand.[1] We are often horrified, enraged, even momentarily immobilized. Atrocity images 'bring us up short', John Berger (1991) once wrote, 'we are seized by them' (p. 42). Sontag and Berger's work is important to the field of visual culture because they direct our attention away from the act of taking a picture – leaving aside the question of photographer and subject – in order to focus on the affective impact on the audience who views the image. Where there is room to disagree, however, is in their evaluation that this effect is a product of the photographic apparatus, as though the horror somehow lay in the image itself and not in what is depicted. What seems more likely is that our immobilization in the face of an image of atrocity is a secondary effect of atrocity itself, part of the traumatic crisis that is war 'passed on' by way of mechanical (and now digital) representations.

This immobilization works on a corporeal as well as a cognitive level.

Reflecting on the history of human cruelty is to encounter a particularly intimate difficulty in thinking. This is because thinking about extreme cruelty presses the thinker up against her limits. In 'Thoughts for the Times on War and Death' Sigmund Freud (1991[1915]) suggests that the attempt to think about war and death is often marked by a feeling of confusion and futility. Disillusionment, in his view, is the 'collateral damage' of war:

> In the confusion of wartime . . . we ourselves are at a loss as to the significance of the impressions which press in upon us and as to the value of the judgements which we form. We cannot but feel that no event has ever destroyed so much that is precious in the common possessions of humanity, confused so many of the clearest intelligences, or so thoroughly debased what is highest. (p. 61)

War evokes disillusionment. War ruins thought. Something might be retrieved from these observations, namely that the attempt to respond to the sufferings of war is to encounter a unique conceptual dilemma, a feeling of futility that impedes thinking. As Freud suggests, this is in part because war grapples with what is in fact unthinkable: death. Hannah Arendt (1994[1963]) brought this dilemma to a more pointed edge with her description of 'the banality of evil'. In such evil, she suggested, there is nothing for thought to grasp onto: Adolph Eichmann's acts were not commonplace, rather, the immensity of evil which he inflicted actually *defies thought*.

But the war in Iraq is not (yet) genocide, and for most of us it is perhaps a more muted disillusionment that signifies the difficulty of thinking and understanding in the face of this conflict. Disillusionment is, at the same time, of course, a strongly affective state. Indeed, in the psychoanalytic view, affect comes before understanding. In other words, we often feel something long before we have any thoughts about what these feelings mean. The separation between the idea (or presentation) of knowledge and its affective force is provided in one of Freud's earliest models of the mind and moreover serves as a defining principle of psychical resistance and repression. In one sense, the disillusionment we may feel when thinking about the war in Iraq should be read as a *resistance* to knowledge that is simply too painful to acknowledge. We simply do not want to admit that we live in a world in which such dreadful events occur. Freud suggests that our wishes for reality all too often interfere with our judgements, in particular when we come into contact with something that is painful. He once called this strange disillusionment 'a revolt in [the mind] against mourning' (1991[1916]: 288).

I take this diversion into psychoanalysis to make two points: first, the encounter with an image of atrocity undoubtedly contains a parallel dilemma. Atrocity images no doubt fall under the heading of difficult knowledge.[2] To be a spectator in this instance is to face the problem of trying to distinguish between reality and one's wishes for reality, and, moreover, to live with the inexorable disappointment that the difference between these

two things brings. Spectators' judgements such as 'this should not have happened' signal this painful psychic dilemma. Indeed, an extended exploration of such responses – the spectator as a witness, as in psychic crisis, and as defending against traumatic perception – may allow for an important reconsideration of the relationship between ethics and aesthetics. One might say that regarding atrocity photographs entails a crisis of witnessing made from the very reception of the traumatic information presented in the image. Each new image demands a fresh mourning for the lost ideals of humanity.

Secondly, this affective dilemma sounds a solemn warning: war's effects are more deeply and unpredictably pervasive than we have yet to imagine. War not only passes through the visual field as topical, but the conflicts of modern war are repeated – or *reproduced,* as it were – in the photographic apparatus itself. Of course, this proximity between the problem of war and the crisis of representation is not only an issue for photography. In a memoir of his experience of reporting on the Rwandan genocide, for example, British journalist Richard Dowden (2004) noted the difficulty he had finding words to describe what he was seeing:

> all the usual human and journalistic instincts to bring something important to the world's attention shriveled in the face of what I was seeing and hearing. I began my main report with the words: 'I do not want to tell you what I saw today. . .' (p. 286)[3]

The breakdown in testimony enacted the breakdown of the world. War's devastating effect, in other words, reaches far beyond the wounds sustained by bodies and buildings: in the age of the camera, war affects us all.

There is, however, room for hope. This hope resides in the simple fact that the same images that horrify and immobilize can also provoke outrage. In the case of the Abu Ghraib photographs, for instance, the same images that were initially made as sadistic souvenirs of torture have become sites of protest against the very acts they represent. Artists across the globe have re-appropriated these images as anti-war icons.[4] Long before Abu Ghraib, American lynching photographs and postcards produced between 1870–1930 showed that photography lends itself all too easily as a tool of terrorism and social control. These images, too, have returned to act as place cards of remembrance and resistance.[5] Such photographs from the history of camera war should remind us that hell has long been established, not by divine judgement in the afterlife, but here on earth by men and women. But the photographic apparatus does more than pave this painful recognition; it also paves the way for the possibility of judgement of these events. There is something irremissibly wrong with a world in which such atrocities occur among people. New roots can only be struck if such acts are judged. As Hannah Arendt was fond of saying, judgement is 'the other side of action'. In this respect, it is no coincidence that the supreme judgement of 'crimes against humanity' was conceived in tandem with the first international human rights movement to use atrocity photographs.[6] The immediate

anguish a spectator feels in the face of a photograph, the almost automatic judgement that 'this is wrong', is the very stroke which opens the possibility for the recognition of the other *as* human and so deserving of dignity. Indeed, it is perhaps only those of us whose flesh has not been wounded directly – but whose imagination has been aroused by such images – who can afford to face and to judge these horrors. Photographs are undoubtedly part of the arsenal of modern war, but they are also conduits of justice.

Notes

1. I am taking this phrasing from Judith Butler (2005), who in a review of Sontag's final book suggests 'Something of a persistent split takes place for Sontag between being affected and being able to think and understand' (p. 824). Here I interpret this not as a character of Sontag's writing but as a widespread effect of encountering an image of atrocity.
2. The term 'difficult knowledge' comes from Deborah P. Britzman (1998, 2000). Britzman uses this term to signify both representations of social traumas and the individual's encounters with them. In such an encounter, meaning itself may become fractured as one attempts to learn from loss and injustice.
3. This line sounds strikingly similar to Edward R. Murrow's famous 1945 CBS radio report on Buchenwald. After a long account of the atrocities, Murrow closed his report by saying, 'I pray you to believe what I have said about Buchenwald. I reported what I saw and heard, but only part of it. For most of it, I have no words.'
4. Dora Apel (2005) has tracked the various anti-war uses of the images (the 'hooded man on the box' in particular) as well as exploring the similarities and differences with the history of lynching images.
5. These images have returned initially through the efforts of James Allen (2000) who recently published his collection of postcards. Together with other support materials, the *Without Sanctuary* collection is currently touring throughout the United States as an exhibition.
6. Adam Hochschild (1999) notes that the first use of the phrase 'crimes against humanity' comes in 1890 from George Washington Williams, a Black American, historian journalist, minister, and lawyer (Hochschild, 1999: 12). The charge was leveled against King Leopold II of Belgium and it referred to atrocities occurring in his personal colony, the Congo Free State. Leopold's treatment of the indigenous population in his colony had become a matter of great controversy in Europe and the United States and in 1904, E.D. Morel with Roger Casement, British Consul to the Congo Free State, mounted an organized campaign in Britain that became the largest humanitarian movement during the late Victorian era. This was also the first humanitarian movement to use atrocity photographs as evidence of crimes occurring in far-away places.

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Delivering Freedom: Australia's Witnessing of Abu Ghraib
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> They hate our freedoms. (George W. Bush)

> . . . there are no longer torture chambers or mass graves or rape rooms in Iraq. (George W. Bush)

The 'war on terror' and its Iraqi front were said to be inextricably linked to the prevalence of weapons of mass destruction. In the absence of such weapons, the war has been justified increasingly on moral grounds – as part of delivering freedom and the 'Democracy Project'. These tropes are reminiscent of colonialism and its massively reinforced notions of the civilizing mission. Imperial nations claimed not only the right but the obligation to rule those nations believed to be 'lost in barbarism'. Like John Stuart Mill, who stated that the British were in India 'because India requires us, that these are territories and peoples who beseech domination from us and that . . . without the English India would fall into ruin' (cited in Said, 1994: 66), imperialists operated with a compelling sense of their right and obligation to rule.

For the coalition of the willing, visual representations have been significant markers of public perceptions of the war. These representations have been