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Consider two widespread ideas—now fast approaching the stature of platitudes—on the impact of photography. Since I find these ideas formulated in my own essays on photography—the earliest of which was written thirty years ago—I feel an irresistible temptation to quarrel with them.

The first idea is that public attention is steered by the attentions of the media—which means, most decisively, images. When there are photographs, a war becomes "real." Thus, the protest against the Vietnam War was mobilized by images. The feeling that something had to be done about the war in Bosnia was built from the attentions of journalists—"the CNN effect," it was sometimes called—which brought images of Sarajevo under siege into hundreds of millions of living rooms night after night for more than three years. These examples illustrate the determining influence of photographs in shaping what catastrophes and crises we pay attention to, what we care about, and ultimately what evaluations are attached to these conflicts.

The second idea—it might seem the converse of what's just been described—is that in a world saturated, no, hyper-saturated with images, those that should matter have a diminishing effect: we become callous. In the end, such images just make us a little less able to feel, to have our conscience pricked.

In the first of the six essays in *On Photography* (1977), I argued that while an event known through photographs certainly becomes more real than it would have been had one never seen the photographs, after repeated exposure it also becomes less real. As much as they create sympathy, I wrote, photographs shrivel sympathy. Is this true? I thought it was when I wrote it. I'm not so sure now. What is the evidence that photographs have a diminishing impact, that our culture of spectatorship neutralizes the moral force of photographs of atrocities?

The question turns on a view of the principal medium of the news, television. An image is drained of its force by the way it is used, where and how often it is seen. Images shown on television are by definition images of which, sooner or later, one tires. What looks like callousness has its origin in the instability of attention that television is organized to arouse and to satiate by its surfeit of images. Image-glut keeps attention light, mobile, relatively indifferent to content. Image-flow precludes a privileged image. The whole point of television is that one can switch channels, that it is normal to switch channels, to become restless, bored. Consumers droop. They need to be stimulated, jump-started, again and again. Content is no more than one of these stimulants. A more reflective engagement with content would require a certain intensity of awareness—just what is weakened by the expectations brought to images disseminated by the media, whose leaching out of content contributes most to the deadening of feeling.

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THE ARGUMENT THAT modern life consists of a diet of horrors by which we are corrupted and to which we gradually become

habituated is a founding idea of the critique of modernity—the critique being almost as old as modernity itself. In 1800, Wordsworth, in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, denounced the corruption of sensibility produced by "the great national events which are daily taking place, and the increasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident, which the rapid communication of intelligence hourly gratifies." This process of overstimulation acts "to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind" and "reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor."

The English poet had singled out the blunting of mind produced by "daily" events and "hourly" news of "extraordinary incident." (In 1800!) Exactly what kind of events and incidents was discreetly left to the reader's imagination. Some sixty years later, another great poet and cultural diagnostician—French, and therefore as licensed to be hyperbolic as the English are prone to understate—offered a more heated version of the same charge. Here is Baudelaire writing in his journal in the early 1860s:

It is impossible to glance through any newspaper, no matter what the day, the month or the year, without finding on every line the most frightful traces of human perversity... Every newspaper, from the first line to the last, is nothing but a tissue of horrors. Wars, crimes, thefts, lecheries, tortures, the evil deeds of princes, of nations, of private individuals; an orgy of universal atrocity. And it is with this loathsome appetizer that civilized man daily washes down his morning repast.

Newspapers did not yet carry photographs when Baudelaire wrote. But this doesn't make his accusatory description of the bourgeois sitting down with his morning newspaper to breakfast with an array of the world's horrors any different from the contemporary critique

of how much desensitizing horror we take in every day, via television as well as the morning paper. Newer technology provides a nonstop feed: as many images of disaster and atrocity as we can make time to look at.

Since *On Photography*, many critics have suggested that the excruciations 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 what I called for in *On Photography*: an "ecology of images"? 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.

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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 more fully to it.

In the more radical—cynical—spin on this critique, there is nothing to defend: 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 situation has to be turned into a spectacle to be real—that is, interesting—to us. People themselves aspire to 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. (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 exist now; it seems to be something of a French specialty.) It is common to say that war, like everything else that appears to be real, is *mediatique*. This was the diagnosis of several distinguished French day-trippers to Sarajevo during the siege, among them Andre Glucksmann: that the war would be won or lost not by anything that happened in Sarajevo, or indeed in Bosnia, 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—that mature style of viewing

which is a prime acquisition of "the modern," and a prerequisite for dis-mantling traditional forms of party-based politics that offer real disagreement and debate. It assumes that everyone is a spectator. It suggests, perversely, unseriously, that there is no real suffering in the world. But it is absurd to identify the world with those zones in the well-off 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 massive injustice 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.

It has become a cliché of the cosmopolitan discussion of images of atrocity to assume that they have little effect, and that there is something innately cynical about their diffusion. As important as people now believe images of war to be, this does not dispel the suspicion that lingers about the interest in these images, and the intentions of those who produce them. Such a reaction comes from two extremes of the spectrum: from cynics who have never been near a war, and from the war-weary who are enduring the miseries being photographed.

Citizens of modernity, consumers of violence as spectacle, adepts of proximity without risk, are schooled to be cynical about the possibility of sincerity. Some people will do anything to keep themselves from being moved. How much easier, from one's chair, far from danger, to claim the position of superiority. In fact, deriding the efforts of those who have borne witness in war zones as "war

tourism" is such a recurrent judgment that it has spilled over into the discussion of war photography as a profession.

The feeling persists that the appetite for such images is a vulgar or low appetite; that it is commercial ghouliness. In Sarajevo in the years of the siege, it was not uncommon to hear, in the middle of a bombardment or a burst of sniper fire, a Sarajevan yelling at the photojournalists, who were easily recognizable by the equipment hanging round their necks, "Are you waiting for a shell to go off so you can photograph some corpses?"

Sometimes they were, though less often than one might imagine, since the photographer on the street in the middle of a bombardment or a burst of sniper fire ran just as much risk of being killed as the civilians he or she was tracking. Further, pursuing a good story was not the only motive for the avidity and the courage of the photojournalists covering the siege. For the duration of this conflict, most of the many experienced journalists who reported from Sarajevo were not neutral. And the Sarajevans did want their plight to be recorded in photographs: victims are interested in the representation of their own sufferings. But they want the suffering to be seen as unique. In early 1994, the English photojournalist Paul Lowe, who had been living for more than a year in the besieged city, mounted an exhibit at a partly wrecked art gallery of the photographs he had been taking, along with photographs he'd taken a few years earlier in Somalia; the Sarajevans, though eager to see new pictures of the ongoing destruction of their city, were offended by the inclusion of the Somalia pictures. Lowe had thought the matter was a simple one. He was a professional photographer, and these were two bodies of work of which he was proud. For the Sarajevans, it

was also simple. To set their sufferings alongside the sufferings of another people was to compare them (which hell was worse?), demoting Sarajevo's martyrdom to a mere instance. The atrocities taking place in Sarajevo have nothing to do with what happens in Africa, they exclaimed. Undoubtedly there was a racist tinge to their indignation—Bosnians are Europeans, people in Sarajevo never tired of pointing out to their foreign friends—but they would have objected too if, instead, pictures of atrocities committed against civilians in Chechnya or in Kosovo, indeed in any other country, had been included in the show. It is intolerable to have one's own sufferings twinned with anybody else's.

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To designate a hell is not, of course, to tell us anything about how to extract people from that hell, how to moderate hell's flames. Still, it seems a good in itself to acknowledge, to have enlarged, one's sense of how much suffering caused by human wickedness there is in the world we share with others. Someone who is perennially surprised that depravity exists, who continues *to* feel disillusioned (even incredulous) when confronted with evidence of what humans are capable of inflicting in the way of gruesome, hands-on cruelties upon other humans, has not reached moral or psychological adulthood.

No one after a certain age has the right to this kind of innocence, of superficiality, to this degree of ignorance, or amnesia.

There now exists a vast repository of images that make it harder to maintain this kind of moral defectiveness. Let the atrocious images haunt us. Even if they are only tokens, and cannot possibly encompass most of the reality to which they refer, they still perform a vital function. The images say: This is what human beings are capable of doing—may volunteer to do, enthusiastically, self-righteously Don't forget.

This is not quite the same as asking people to remember a particularly monstrous bout of evil. ("Never forget.") Perhaps too

much value is assigned to memory, not enough to thinking. Remembering *is* an ethical act, has ethical value in and of itself. Memory is, achingly, the only relation we can have with the dead. So the belief that remembering is an ethical act is deep in our natures as humans, who know we are going to die, and who mourn those who in the normal course of things die before us—grandparents, parents, teachers, and older friends. Heartlessness and amnesia seem to go together. But history gives contradictory signals about the value of remembering in the much longer span of a collective history. There is simply too much injustice in the world. And too much remembering (of ancient grievances: Serbs, Irish) embitters. To make peace is to forget. To reconcile, it is necessary that memory be faulty and limited.

If the goal is having some space in which to live one's own life, then it is desirable that the account of specific injustices dissolve into a more general understanding that human beings everywhere do terrible things to one another.

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PARKED IN FRONT of the little screens—television, computer, palmtop—we can surf to images and brief reports of disasters throughout the world. It seems as if there is a greater quantity of such news than before. This is probably an illusion. It's just that the spread of news is "everywhere." And some people's sufferings have a lot more intrinsic interest to an audience (given that suffering must be acknowledged as having an audience) than the sufferings of others. That news about war is now disseminated worldwide does not mean that the capacity to mink about the suffering of people far away is significantly larger. In a modern life—a life in which there is

a superfluity of things to which we are invited to pay attention—it seems normal to turn away from images that simply make us feel bad. Many more would be switching channels if the news media were to devote more time to the particulars of human suffering caused by war and other infamies. But it is probably not true that people are responding less.

That we are not totally transformed, that we can turn away, turn the page, switch the channel, does not impugn the ethical value of an assault by images. It is not a defect that we are not seared, that we do not suffer *enough*, when we see these images. Neither is the photograph supposed to repair our ignorance about the history and causes of the suffering it picks out and frames. Such images cannot be more than an invitation to pay attention, to reflect, to learn, to examine the rationalizations for mass suffering offered by established powers. Who caused what the picture shows? Who is responsible? Is it excusable? Was it inevitable? Is there some state of affairs which we have accepted up to now that ought to be challenged? All this, with the understanding that moral indignation, like compassion, cannot dictate a course of action.

The frustration of not being able to do anything about what the images show may be translated into an accusation of the indecency of regarding such images, or the indecencies of the way such images are disseminated—flanked, as they may well be, by advertising for emollients, pain relievers, and SUVs. If we could do something about what the images show, we might not care as much about these issues.

suffering at a distance, as if there were some other way of watching. But watching up close—without the mediation of an image—is still just watching.

Some of the reproaches made against images of atrocity are not different from characterizations of sight itself. Sight is effortless; sight requires spatial distance; sight can be turned off (we have lids on our eyes, we do not have doors on our ears). The very qualities that made the ancient Greek philosophers consider sight the most excellent, the noblest of the senses are now associated with a deficit.

It is felt that there is something morally wrong with the abstract of reality offered by photography; that one has no right to experience the suffering of others at a distance, denuded of its raw power; that we pay too high a human (or moral) price for those hitherto admired qualities of vision—the standing back from the aggressiveness of the world which frees us for observation and for elective attention. But this is only to describe the function of the mind itself.

There's nothing wrong with standing back and thinking. To paraphrase several sages: "Nobody can think and hit someone at the same time."

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Certain photographs—emblems of suffering, such as the snapshot of the little boy in the Warsaw Ghetto in 1943, his hands raised, being herded to the transport to a death camp—can be used like memento mori, as objects of contemplation to deepen one's sense of reality; as secular icons, if you will. But that would seem to demand the equivalent of a sacred or meditative space in which to look at diem. Space reserved for being serious is hard to come by in a modern society, whose chief model of a public space is the megastore (which may also be an airport or a museum).

It seems exploitative to look at harrowing photographs of other people's pain in an art gallery. Even those ultimate images whose gravity, whose emotional power, seems fixed for all time, the concentration camp photographs from 1945, weigh differently when seen in a photography museum (the Hotel Sully in Paris, the International Center of Photography in New York); in a gallery of contemporary art; in a museum catalogue; on television; in the pages of *The New York Times*; in the pages of *Rolling Stone*; in a book. A photograph seen in a photo album or printed on rough newsprint (like the Spanish Civil War photographs) means something different when displayed in an Agnes B. boutique. Every picture is seen in some setting. And the settings have multiplied. A notorious

advertising campaign for Benetton, the Italian manufacturer of casual clothing, used a photograph of the blood-stained shirt of a dead Croatian soldier. Advertising photographs are often just as ambitious, artful, slyly casual, transgressive, ironic, and solemn as art photography. When Capa's falling soldier appeared in *Life* opposite the Vitalis ad, there was a huge, unbridgeable difference in look between the two kinds of photographs, "editorial" and "advertising." Now there is not.

Much of the current skepticism about the work of certain photographers of conscience seems to amount to little more than displeasure at the fact that photographs are circulated so diversely; that there is no way to guarantee reverential conditions in which to look at these pictures and be fully responsive to them. Indeed, apart from the settings where patriotic deference to leaders is exercised, there seems no way to guarantee contemplative or inhibiting space for anything now.

So far as photographs with the most solemn or heartrending subject matter are art—and this is what they become when they hang on walls, whatever the disclaimers—they partake of the fate of all wall-hung or floor-supported art displayed in public spaces. That is, they are stations along a—usually accompanied—stroll. A museum or gallery visit is a social situation, riddled with distractions, in the course of which art is seen and commented on.¹⁰ Up to a point, the weight and seriousness of such photographs survive better in a book, where one can look privately, linger over the pictures, without talking. Still, at some moment the book will be closed. The strong emotion will become a transient one. Eventually the specificity of the photographs' accusations will fade; the denunciation of a

particular conflict and attribution of specific crimes will become a denunciation of human cruelty, human savagery as such. The photographer's intentions are irrelevant to this larger process.

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IS THERE AN ANTIDOTE to the perennial seductiveness of war? And is this a question a woman is more likely to pose than a man? (Probably yes.)

Could one be mobilized actively to oppose war by an image (or a group of images) as one might be enrolled among the opponents of capital punishment by reading, say, Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* or Turgenev's "The Execution of Troppmann," an account by the expatriate writer, invited to be an observer in a Paris prison, of a famous criminal's last hours before being guillotined? A narrative seems likely to be more effective than an image. Partly it is a question of the length of time one is obliged to look, to feel. No photograph or portfolio of photographs can unfold, go further, and further still, as do *The Ascent* (1977), by the Ukrainian director Larisa Shepitko, the most affecting film about the sadness of war I know, and an astounding Japanese documentary, Kazuo Hara's *The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On* (1987), the portrait of a "deranged" veteran of the Pacific war, whose life's work is denouncing Japanese war crimes from a sound truck he drives through the streets of Tokyo and paying most unwelcome visits to his former superior officers, demanding that they apologize for crimes, such as the murder of American prisoners in the Philippines, which they either ordered or condoned.

Among single antiwar images, the huge photograph that Jeff Wall made in 1992 titled "Dead Troops Talk (A Vision After an Ambush

of a Red Army Patrol near Moqor, Afghanistan, Winter 1986)" seems to me exemplary in its thoughtfulness and power. The antithesis of a document, the picture, a Cibachrome transparency seven and a half feet high and more than thirteen feet wide and mounted on a light box, shows figures posed in a landscape, a blasted hillside, that was constructed in the artist's studio. Wall, who is Canadian, was never in Afghanistan. The ambush is a made-up event in a savage war that had been much in the news. Wall set as his task the imagining of war's horror (he cites Goya as an inspiration), as in nineteenth-century history painting and other forms of history-as-spectacle that emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—just before the invention of the camera—such as tableaux vivants, wax displays, dioramas, and panoramas, which made the past, especially the immediate past, seem astonishingly, disturbingly real.

The figures in Wall's visionary photo-work are "realistic" but, of course, the image is not. Dead soldiers don't talk. Here they do.

Thirteen Russian soldiers in bulky winter uniforms and high boots are scattered about a pocked, blood-splashed slope lined with loose rocks and the litter of war: shell casings, crumpled metal, a boot that holds the lower part of a leg. The scene might be a revised version of the end of Gance's *J'accuse*, when the dead soldiers from the First World War rise from their graves, but these Russian conscripts, slaughtered in the Soviet Union's own late folly of a colonial war, were never buried. A few still have their helmets on. The head of one kneeling figure, talking animatedly, foams with his red brain matter. The atmosphere is warm, convivial, fraternal. Some slouch, leaning on an elbow, or sit, chatting, their opened skulls and

destroyed hands on view. One man bends over another who lies on his side as if asleep, perhaps encouraging him to sit up. Three men are horsing around: one with a huge wound in his belly straddles another, lying prone, who is laughing at a third man, on his knees, who playfully dangles before him a strip of flesh. One soldier, helmeted, legless, has turned to a comrade some distance away, an alert smile on his face. Below him are two who don't seem quite up to the resurrection and lie supine, their bloodied heads hanging down the stony incline.

Engulfed by the image, which is so accusatory, one could fantasize that the soldiers might turn and talk to us. But no, no one is looking out of the picture. There's no threat of protest. They are not about to yell at us to bring a halt to that abomination which is war. They haven't come back to life in order to stagger off to denounce the war-makers who sent them to kill and be killed. And they are not represented as terrifying to others, for among them (far left) sits a white-garbed Afghan scavenger, entirely absorbed in going through somebody's kit bag, of whom they take no note, and entering the picture above them (top right) on the path winding down the slope are two Afghans, perhaps soldiers themselves, who, it would seem from the Kalashnikovs collected near their feet, have already stripped the dead soldiers of their weapons. These dead are supremely uninterested in the living: in those who took their lives; in witnesses—and in us. Why should they seek our gaze? What would they have to say to us? "We"—this "we" is everyone who has never experienced anything like what they went through—don't understand. We don't get it. We truly can't imagine what it was like. We can't imagine how dreadful, how terrifying war is; and how

normal it becomes. Can't understand, can't imagine. That's what every soldier, and every journalist and aid worker and independent observer who has put in time under fire, and had the luck to elude the death that struck down others nearby, stubbornly feels. And they are right.