

# The New York Times Magazine

## ON PHOTOGRAPHY

# What Does It Mean to Look at This?

By Teju Cole

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A photograph of a group of suffering people: We look at them, and from the sadness of their expressions and gestures, we know something awful has happened. But finding out exact details, through the photograph alone, is more difficult. Who these sufferers are, why they suffer, who or what caused the suffering and what ought to be done about it: These are entirely more complex questions, questions hard to answer only by looking at the photograph.

The accounts journalists typically give of their motivations, particularly in photographing violence, aren't always convincing. Why go off to wars or conflict zones at great personal risk to take pictures of people whose lives are in terrifying states of disarray? The answer is often tautological: The images are physically dangerous and psychologically costly to make, and therefore they must be the right images.

Susan Sontag, probably the most influential writer on the intersection of violence and photography, didn't buy this argument. With forensic prose, she cut through complacent apologies for war photography and set photojournalistic images of violence squarely in the context of viewers' voyeurism. This was the argument advanced in her 1977 essay collection, "On Photography." Sontag believed that a certain passivity was inescapable in spectatorship, and that any image of violence would be tainted by this passive distance. "Through the camera people become customers or tourists of reality," she wrote. Looking at those images, she seemed to suggest, was both self-absorbed and self-absolving.

She revisited the subject near the end of her life, with more complexity and focus. In “Regarding the Pain of Others” (2003), she still viewed photojournalists with skepticism (she dubbed them “star witnesses” and “specialized tourists”), and remained averse to the kind of prurient gaze that images of torment can foster. But she amended some of her earlier positions. She previously argued that photographs, despite their capacity to generate sympathy, could quickly shrivel it through overexposure. She became less sure about that. She also queried the idea, implicit in her earlier arguments and explicit in the work of theorists like Guy Debord and Jean Baudrillard, that the abundance and distribution of images made reality itself little more than a spectacle:

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.

Sontag wondered, near the end of “Regarding the Pain of Others,” whether “one has no right to experience the suffering of others at a distance, denuded of its raw power,” and she came to the conclusion that sometimes a bit of distance can be good. “There’s nothing wrong with standing back and thinking,” she wrote. (Even more than the incisiveness of her judgments, Sontag’s willingness to rethink her views is what endears her to me.) The challenges of viewership have only intensified in the 21st century. Images of violence have both proliferated and mutated, demanding new forms of image literacy. Some recent scholars of photography have argued with some of Sontag’s assertions in “On Photography.” One of those scholars, Ariella Azoulay, has questioned the claim of voyeurism. Azoulay reads images of conflict or atrocity as constituting a more interwoven set of actors, displacing the question from one of voyeurism, and even of empathy, to one of participatory citizenship. We are all in this together, Azoulay seems to be saying (and I don’t think the Sontag of “Regarding the Pain of Others” would disagree). In making such an argument, Azoulay attends to a different tradition in

photography writing, one connected to an assertion made in 1857 by Lady Elizabeth Eastlake in *The London Quarterly Review*: “For it is one of the pleasant characteristics of this pursuit that it unites men of the most diverse lives, habits and stations, so that whoever enters its ranks finds himself in a kind of republic, where it needs apparently but to be a photographer to be a brother.”

But in Azoulay’s view, it is not only being a photographer that grants a person admission to this imaginative republic. Taking photos, looking at photos and being the subject of photos are mutually reinforcing activities in which the participants are interdependent and complicit. The meaning of any given image arises from their various roles as well as that of the camera itself. This is one of the points Azoulay makes at length in her lucid and indispensable 2008 study, “*The Civil Contract of Photography*.” She pins her argument on the civic relations between people: “When and where the subject of the photograph is a person who has suffered some form of injury, a viewing of the photograph that reconstructs the photographic situation and allows a reading of the injury inflicted on others becomes a civic skill, not an exercise in aesthetic appreciation.” Azoulay’s project arose out of her own experiences as a Jewish Israeli citizen who, nevertheless, had to interpret the images she was seeing of Palestinian suffering. Are these people radically other, or are they somehow included in the general “we”?

**Photographs of atrocity** always confront us with questions of inequality. But these questions can no longer simply be reduced to “Why them and why not us?” If, as Azoulay argues, photography deterritorializes citizenship, then these images accuse, they interrogate and they put us in the same boat with those we are looking at. “What have we done,” they ask us, “to create the conditions in which others, our fellow citizens, undergo these unspeakable experiences?”

The scholar Susie Linfield critiques Sontag in different terms. In “*The Cruel Radiance*” (2010), Linfield defends what she sees as the noble ideals of documentary photography. She finds fault with a number of notable photography critics (Sontag, as well as Roland Barthes and John Berger, among others) for being distrustful of photography, for not

loving it enough. Sontag is, to Linfield, a “brilliant skeptic,” and Linfield finds this a much less attractive persona than the one of the “smitten lover,” which is what she deems the film critic Pauline Kael.

For Linfield, what photography can do especially well is present the ways in which the ideals of human rights fall short. A photograph cannot show human rights, but it can depict, with terrifying realism, what a starving person looks like, what a human body looks like after it has been shot. “Photographs show how easily we are reduced to the merely physical, which is to say how easily the body can be maimed, starved, splintered, beaten, burnt, torn and crushed.”

This is sharply observed. But the devil is in the details, and the kind of details photographs are good at are visual and affective, different from the kind of details we might call “political,” which have to do with laws, fine shades of linguistic meaning and the distribution of power. For all her optimism about the efficacy of photography, Linfield admits that “we, the viewers, must look outside the frame to understand the complex realities out of which these photographs grew.”

In “Regarding the Pain of Others,” Sontag wrote: “The photographer’s intentions do not determine the meaning of the photograph, which will have its own career, blown by the whims and loyalties of the diverse communities that have use for it.” The truth of the statement is obvious in certain cases. A number of now-notorious photographs were made in late 2003 by Pvt. Charles Graner Jr. and others at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. In stripping prisoners naked, piling them up into a pyramid or ordering them to masturbate, Private Graner and other American soldiers might have intended to use humiliation to “soften” their prisoners up for interrogation. But the images, once they were released into the world, had a much more shocking and enraging meaning.

Or consider the case of the Syrian photographer code-named Caesar. He was making photographs, with a team, as part of his military-police job. Disturbed at the increasing number of gruesome murders he had to photograph, he began to smuggle out large numbers of images — thousands of people starved, beaten or tortured to death —

between the fall of 2011 and the summer of 2013. Caesar himself eventually escaped Syria. His images, initially made for one purpose (as the regime's records of its enemies), came to take on a different significance (as evidence of astonishing crimes against humanity).

The gap between the photographer's intention and the subsequent life of the image is usually not as significant as in these two cases. But there's always some kind of disjuncture, a disjuncture that arises from photography's tendency to show only so much but to often mean much more: A photograph connotes more than it denotes. As the scholar Tina Campt has written, photographs don't speak, but they are not mute. They are quiet, and solicit a kind of listening.

**Let's return to** that photograph of a group of suffering people: It registers at first as a familiar type of image, the expertly made photograph of an atrocity in a faraway country. The photographer's expertise expresses itself through color and visual rhythm; despite the subject matter, it is a beautiful photograph. Five people are visible, four women and one man, surrounded by rubble. On a blue door or wall is graffiti. The man and three of the women all have hands clapped to their mouths and noses or raised to cover their faces, as though they are simultaneously grieving and protecting themselves from a stench. The fourth woman has averted her eyes. Something horrible is going on, something out of shot.

But what does the photograph, by itself, tell us? Not much. Unless it is supported with extraphotographic evidence, it will be mired in platitudes about human brutality or the universality of grief, truths for which no photographic argument is required. At the most basic level, that extra evidence begins with the photographer's name and a caption: "Susan Meiselas. Neighbors watch as dead bodies are burned in the streets of Estelí, 1979." The caption establishes a place and time, as well as a plain description of an event. But if we stop there, we have only decorated the image with a bit of knowledge.

Further investigation might reveal that Estelí is a city in northern Nicaragua, and that in early 1979, a popular struggle by the Sandinistas to unseat the dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle was gaining strength. We might discover that the dead bodies just out of shot in

Meiselas's picture were of people who were killed by Somoza's National Guard. Meiselas told me that the people in the photograph were reacting to "the intensity of putrefied bodies that have been on the street for three to five days in the hot sun." Out there photographing, she could smell them. We almost can, too.

This single photograph could be supported by a shelf's worth of books: about the history of Nicaragua, about right-wing regimes, about South America in the late '70s, about leftist dreams of revolution, about American foreign policy, about the sense of smell, about the personal courage of a woman photographing in a war zone, about the political economy of Estelí and so on. The photograph cannot do that by itself, but it can occasion those investigations.

Recognizing the frustration of trying to make photographs speak to the incredible complexity of civil conflict, Meiselas has written (of her time in Nicaragua): "I had photographs, they have a revolution." In the course of her time in Nicaragua, in 1978 and 1979, she made hundreds of photographs. She made many more in subsequent visits. What difference did those photographs make? After all, what could be more irritating, and even offensive, than to have someone photographing you while you mourn, horror-struck, the burning of a relative's body? Would you want a photographer there, clicking away, on the worst day of your life?

I return to Azoulay's idea that the photograph functions as a bond between the photographer and the photographed, that it's a kind of promise made by the first of these people to the second: *I will bear witness to this*. In their grief, in their shock, even in their irritation at the presence of a photographer, the hope for those who are photographed in the midst of their suffering is that what is happening to them will go out into the world, and possibly, by being seen, will help bring them relief.

Proof of this is elusive. We've all seen war photographs that are mere grist for the journalistic mill. Some photographers *are* addicted to war; some viewers *are* voyeurs. And yet photography is not limited by these ways of seeing. Photography works and

doesn't work, it is tolerable and intolerable, it confounds and often exceeds our expectations.

Conflict photography arises out of a huge set of moving variables that in unpredictable, unreliable but unignorable ways help make the demands of justice visible. Taking photographs is sometimes a terrible thing to do, but often, not taking the necessary photo, not bearing witness or not being allowed to do so, can be worse.

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