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Nikons and Icons

Is the aestheticization-of-suffering critique still valid?

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There was a time, at the end of the 1980s, when the critique of documentary photography based on the "aestheticization of suffering" was so influential that it became virtually impossible to defend documentary practice. Any such defense was regarded as at best naive and at worst ideologically suspect.

Then came 9/11. I have argued elsewhere that the attack on the Twin Towers, the most photographed event in history, effectively reset the clock on documentary images, clearing away years of accumulated censure. The affective unreality of the event cried out for representation, and most people experienced it as an image. Photography's special capacity as a medium for mourning brought us close to it again and made us realize how much we need public, shared images to make sense of such events. Susan Sontag's book *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003) was in part a recognition of this epochal shift, and it revised and updated her earlier views on photographic images and their social effects in *On Photography* (1977).

Looking back on it now, those earlier critiques of photographic representation appear dated and overdetermined. Too many of the persistent questions about our complex relation to public images were answered as if for good. The trenchant critiques of documentary photography by Martha Rosler, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, Allan Sekula, and others were necessary corrections to a great deal of muddled mystification about photographic representation and the real effects of public images. But over time, these critiques became enshrined as definitive, and writers and artists began to treat them as unassailable truths rather than as timely interventions. Students made operational assumptions ostensibly based on, but not always supported by, these texts, and the aestheticization-of-suffering critique entered a period of academic mannerism.

Sam Taylor-Wood, Jude Law, 2003, color photograph. From the series “Crying Men,” 2002–2004.

Beautiful Suffering: Photography and the Traffic in Pain is a companion volume to the exhibition of the same name held at the Williams College Museum of Art in 2006, and it reproduces all of the works in the show along with the accompanying wall texts. The book was edited by political scientist Mark Reinhardt and art historians Erina Duganne and Holly Edwards. It includes substantial essays by the three editors, as well as by John Stomberg, deputy director and senior curator of the Williams museum, and cultural critic and theorist Mieke Bal.

As its title indicates, *Beautiful Suffering* begins with the conventional critique of the aestheticization of suffering in its pursuit of “alternatives to mainstream photojournalistic ways of representing suffering,” with the worthy goal of fostering “a more reflective awareness of how we represent and address the rampant suffering and the corollary spectatorships that characterize our time.” “Without scenes of death, destruction, misery, and trauma,” the editors write, “the contemporary image environment would be nearly unrecognizable.” And they note that since 9/11, “accounts of trauma have become still more crucial to the formation of the social bond and the shaping of national identity.”

In his essay, “Picturing Violence: Aesthetics and the Anxiety of Critique,” Reinhardt cites the aestheticization critiques by Rosler, Solomon-Godeau, and Sekula as definitive but registers doubt about the sufficiency of these critiques. He calls aestheticization “an overly blunt tool for getting at what is most troubling about certain photographs of suffering people” and recognizes the anxiety about such images as “an anxiety . . . of the formal choices and rhetorical conventions, and the resulting transformative work, of representation itself.”

That, in a nutshell, is what ultimately makes the aestheticization critique insufficient. Yes, there are inherent problems with representing the pain of others, but does that mean we should no longer attempt such representations? Reinhardt generously acknowledges my work in *Between the Eyes: Essays on Photography and Politics* (2003) but takes me to task for proceeding “too swiftly” after having “established the futility of seeking to avoid the aesthetic work of transformation.” I would argue that the events of the past six years have shown that the world has moved on as well. These images are not going away, and the gap between them and their effective analysis is growing. In a footnote, Reinhardt notes that historian Susan Buck-Morss pressed him on the real sources of anxiety about images of suffering, asking, “Is there not something in images that resists or eludes every effort to fix meaning through language? Might *that* be the underlying source of anxiety?”

In his “Genealogy of Orthodox Documentary,” Stomberg concludes that “the debates surrounding

contemporary photographic representations of human suffering derive, almost unaltered, from . . . polarities invented in 1938" in the debates within the Frankfurt School and also in the conflict between the documentary approaches of Margaret Bourke-White and Walker Evans. Edwards focuses on the public trajectory and multiple migrations of Steve McCurry's *Afghan Girl*, which first appeared in 1985 on the cover of *National Geographic*. In her essay, "Photography After the Fact," Duganne addresses the always-contested line between art and documentary by looking at the work of Luc Delahaye, Sally Mann, and Alfredo Jaar and cites Rosler's brilliant critique of the tradition of "concerned photography" in the 1981 essay "in, around, and afterthoughts (on documentary photography)," in which Rosler accuses concerned photography of embracing "the weakest possible idea of social engagement, namely compassion." This theme is taken up by Bal in her contribution as "the problem of sentimentality." Bal's "The Pain of Images" makes the strongest case for the enduring value of the aestheticization critique but falls back on reductive views of the aesthetic (and of photography), attacking "the indifference of aesthetics" and calling photography "the medium so troublesomely bound up with reality." Referring to James Nachtwey's 1993 image of a starving man in Sudan, she writes, "The photograph is less obviously 'art,' although also well made to an almost troubling degree," concluding that "beauty distracts, and worse, it gives pleasure—a pleasure that is parasitical on the pain of others."

This censure of beauty in the depiction of suffering is never applied to music, and seldom to literature or painting, but often to photography. The censure contends that photographs shouldn't aestheticize their subjects, because this contaminates the real with visual pleasure. It is the performance of this contamination, the making of the image, that troublesomely implicates us in its foul mixture, where, as Bal writes, "the questions of empathy, sympathy, or identification— of bottomless but directionless emotion as well as the seemingly opposite question of aesthetics and its required disinterestedness— are bound up with the most obvious problem of what the exhibition's subtitle pointedly calls 'the traffic in pain.'" Why is the emotion elicited by such images "bottomless" or (necessarily) "directionless"? Is there a political efficacy to empathy? To say that compassion is only the first step toward social justice is one thing; to say that it is destructive to social engagement is quite another. One needs first to feel the pain of others before one can begin to act to alleviate it. And one of the ways humans recognize the pain of others is by seeing it, in images. This emotional attachment to images is unstable and can be manipulated, certainly, but that doesn't mean it should be disproportionately censured.

No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy approaches the question of the social effects of public images very differently. The authors, Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, who come from the field of rhetoric (which they call "both a practical art and a theory of public address"), are remarkably free of the basic assumptions of the aestheticization-of-suffering discourse. They announce early on that they "take aesthetics seriously," that they consider photojournalism to be "a patently artistic form of public address," and that "the zenith of photojournalistic achievement is the iconic photograph." Challenging "the presumption that visual media categorically degrade public rationality," they approach photojournalism as "an important technology of liberal-democratic citizenship."

Taking iconic press images seriously in aesthetic and political terms, they proceed to examine a number of examples, including *Migrant Mother*, 1936, by Dorothea Lange; *Times Square Kiss*, 1945, by Alfred Eisenstaedt; *Raising the Flag on Mount Suribachi*, 1945, by Joe Rosenthal, with *Three Firefighters Raising the American Flag at Ground Zero*, 2001, by Thomas Franklin; *Kent State University Massacre*, 1970, by John Filo; *Accidental Napalm*, 1972, by Nick Ut; *Tiananmen Square*, 1989, by Stuart Franklin; and *Explosion of the Hindenburg*, 1937, by Sam Shere, with *Explosion of the Challenger*, 1986, by NASA. Their close readings of these iconic images employ multiple strategies and tools to investigate how they create "a public culture that lies somewhere between hegemony and resistance." Avoiding previous approaches that "produce social theory at the expense of what the

images are actually doing," they look hard at the images themselves and at the way they are used, appropriated, parodied, and celebrated.

Hariman and Lucaites recognize that talking appreciatively about icons causes "many in the academic audience to conclude we have a naïve understanding of representation," but they contend it is time for a fresh approach in a new era. "The beginning of the twenty-first century," they write, "has been a renaissance for photojournalism, one driven by events (principally 9/11) and, more significantly, by the addition of digital media." They recognize that "the study of various practices of visual representation is booming" and that this study draws on methods previously underutilized.

Their approach, though grounded in a theory of public address, is primarily practical: "We are dedicated to the critical study of public discourse and public arts on the assumption that they are crucial to the success of democracy." They want to understand "how public address fulfills the interrelated functions of constructing public identity and motivating political behavior."

Could it be that what were in the past necessary and substantive critiques of representation have become, in practical terms, hindrances to actually looking at images? And that this has contributed to an effective political passivity in the face of a rapidly changing communications environment? Hariman and Lucaites rightly point to "the larger problem identified by Peter Sloterdijk that modernity has entered into a terminal phase of 'enlightened selfconsciousness' whereby all forms of power have been unmasked with *no change in behavior* [my emphasis]. Irony is too widely dispersed throughout modern consciousness, subjectivity too fragmented, the administration of power too cynical, and critique too disposed to reification for unmasking to be other than a reproduction of the world it would change."

Rather than seek to unmask "the traffic in pain," Hariman and Lucaites address public life as "a trafficking in attitudes," and they follow Kenneth Burke in defining attitudes as incipient actions. "Decisive action," they write, "actually is rather rare in stable societies and everyday life, but all of life is in fact defined by one's potential for action." The formation of attitudes through the propagation of words and images is a large part of life in a functioning democracy, and we devalue it at our peril. To Hariman and Lucaites, the stakes in this struggle involve the shift "from democratic to liberal norms of representation," that is, "from democracy and the *public* demands of collectivity to liberalism and the *private* needs of the individual." Iconic public images provide a way for us to negotiate collective needs and desires.

The authors' approach is eclectic: "Both traditional conceptions of persuasive appeal and modern methods of ideology critique are needed to explicate the icon, while neither approach alone will capture how collective identity is negotiated aesthetically." In relation to the iconic photograph of the Kent State massacre in 1970, Hariman and Lucaites point to the "general suspicion or suppression of emotional display" in political life in the United States, which is part of a larger derogation of "the role of affect in the public sphere." This derogation perpetuates the shift from democracy to liberalism "by presenting emotions as if they were individual properties." Public emotion, they say, operates enthymematically; that is, certain premises are left out, because they are taken up and completed collectively. Hariman and Lucaites go a long way toward explicating a defense of empathy as necessary for collective action. "Citizenship," they say, "is transferable from one body to the other, not by legal entitlement or any contractual relationship, but through acts of empathy, affectional identification, and emotional expression on behalf of the other."

All of which takes time. It requires slowing things down. "'Democracy, consultation, the basis of politics, requires time,'" they write, quoting Paul Virilio and Sylvère Lotringer, "while the fundamental dynamic of modern society is the *acceleration* of all modes of exchange." Hariman and Lucaites also point to a related paradox in our current communications environment:

> The icon organizes public memory around a very few signal events as the exponential increases in information availability overwhelm individual processing capacity. A few dominant images can reflect either a scarcity of images or the reverse: an overabundance that has to be ignored if one is to function at all.

So, as the number of images and the speed of their transmission increase, fewer and fewer iconic images become increasingly dominant, while the multitude of images disappears into inaccessible storage (like Bill Gates's Corbis archive, secreted away in Pennsylvania's Iron Mountain). And this could lead to a very big problem:

> Should public commemoration become fixated on too few images, memory calcifies around these few events while great swaths of experience are lost. Historians always will have access to other media, but the ordinary citizen living in media space is left with the equivalent of an aboriginal calendar.

And, as William S. Burroughs taught us, the most effective systems of social control in history have been calendrical:

> By limiting the record to icons marking major events, and by the formulaic use of the icons over time, tribal memory becomes reduced to oral narratives that increasingly follow the cues on the visual artifact. The same is happening in public memory.

The challenges of public memory and public agency are rapidly increasing as the technologies of communication change at an accelerating rate, and our ability to respond, to keep up, will depend on our willingness to find new ways of analyzing and understanding image flows. The paradox is that some of these ways are ancient, as well as nascent.

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