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### War Photography and Image Society

If I might assign a mythical persona to “Spectacle” for a moment, his or her objective would always be to keep the attention of the world, to create something to view that is unusual, notable or entertaining (separate from reality); to keep the illusion alive. Western culture is obsessed with spectacle. The American social critic Christopher Lasch wrote in his essay *The Culture of Narcissism*, “In a society dominated by the production and consumption of images, no part of life can remain immune from the invasion of spectacle.” In reference to the spectacle and conflict photography, there are a few areas available for closer inspection: the spectator-photographer as he takes images of battle; the spectacle of war reporting which the media uses as a tool to attract their audiences; and the spectatorship of the audience viewing these images. In addition to these areas this essay will also touch on how the field of war photography is being influenced by the culture of spectacle in America.

Photography provides an in-depth view of war that most other artistic mediums cannot access. For the most part the viewers of a photographic image have the initial assumption that the image represents something that was physically present in front of the lens; therefore, that victim, those wounds and this atrocity did exist at the moment this photograph was taken. Photographs, the essence of our visual culture, determine how and what we remember of a war. This is affirmed by Garoian and Gaudelius: “...we characterize the ideology of visual culture as “spectacle pedagogy” in that images teach us what and how to see and think and, in doing so, they mediate the ways in which we interact with one another as social beings.”

Historically, images of war served as glorified shots of all the most positive aspects of war, giving reasons for continuing a war or calling for support for the sacrifice of soldiers. In Britain images were staged in order to produce a better, more thought-provoking image: bodies may have been moved, photographers might have received instructions about what to photograph, and they would look for more attractive locations in which to capture these things. Usually photographers who were sent by various news agencies or the War Office had a specific agenda in mind: make the war more attractive by finding images that prove that it is beneficial for the government to be pursuing or continuing this war. Particularly important to these messages would be those reconstructions of moments of victory that cast soldiers as attractive golden boys defending national honor. These messages which aim to cast a positive light over war remain today through repeated calls to support our current military pursuits.

With the Vietnam War came the turning point where the intentions of photographs of war, and thus the ethics of photographers, changed.<sup>1</sup> Instead of the glamorized victories of yesteryear, the images captured intended to expose real horrors. It became a criticism of war (Sontag 65). Some of the most famous images from this war are the color photographs of the My Lai massacre, Huynh Cong Ut's photograph of children running from a village that has just been saturated with Napalm<sup>2</sup>, and Eddie Adams's photograph entitled "General Nguyen Ngoc Loan executing a Viet Cong Prisoner in Saigon." While the latter photograph was indeed staged, it was an authentic execution, the moment of a man being killed, which took advantage of the spectatorship of the photographer and the attention of his audience: Loan staged the execution only because the photographers were there. With the emergence of images such as these came a

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<sup>1</sup> It was during the 1960s and 70s that the genre of "social documentation photography" became a more relevant and recognized field. The photographer Cornell Capa defined "the concerned photographer" as an individual whose images are intended to educate and change the world and in so doing, would bring about humanitarian change (source: <https://www.icp.org/>: "the concerned photographer").

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, Nick Ut's career transition from photographing horrific war to Hollywood celebrities such as Paris Hilton whilst in mid-crisis (Source: [www.asap.ap.org](http://www.asap.ap.org)).

higher awareness of both the inhumanity which war makes of all involved as well as journalistic integrity. Despite the history of staging photographs, today in current conflicts and in the cases of altered photographs, it is not uncommon for photographers to be fired if it is found that they have altered even a shadow on an image in order to preserve photographic truth.

These photographs also brought awareness to the audience of what those experiencing war suffered. Sontag points out the voyeuristic aspect of being part of the audience. Images of suffering might provoke feelings of both shame and shock and subject us to the role of voyeur whether or not we allow this. As civilians, no matter how far or close a conflict might be, or how indignant we might become at viewing these pictures, the fact remains that we are unable to do anything about it other than change the channel. Images of suffering are only an invitation to ask questions: Who is responsible? The spectacle here is found in the abject sorrow of those being hurt and, just as important, those inflicting this pain. We are drawn, we are captivated—more in the sense of being incredulous out of horror—by the monstrous allure of what is repulsive. In fact, it might be easier to stomach details pertaining to the monster versus the anonymous victim because it is easier to feel repulsed than guilty or helpless as we watch from the sidelines.

Throughout Sontag's writings we are presented with disturbing descriptions about images of suffering and destruction and how difficult it is to look at them. Thomas Sokolowski is quoted in Kelly Thomas's article: "When art deals with the tragedies of the ancient world or the 19<sup>th</sup> century, people can say, 'That didn't happen in my time.'" "When referring to media coverage of wars, when conflict becomes current and personal and close in proximity then it becomes much harder to deal with. Presumably this is because of fear, the guilty discomfort that comes with viewing the pain and agony of others and the idea that these victims had an identity. We feel compelled to feel bad, to wonder what we could have done to stop this from happening, but the only thing we are capable of doing is asking questions.

As part of my research I interviewed Ivan LaBianca, a freelance press photographer who covered the civil war conflicts occurring in Libya in June 2011 and then again on a later trip in August and September of 2011. LaBianca described the current field of conflict photography (which will be important in seeing the link later between how spectacle has shifted the field). Today, conflict photographers operate either as part of a journalistic team or are free press photographers. They are frequently “embedded” with soldiers in order to capture an on-going battle. While there is criticism that they are only capturing one side of the feud, today many ongoing wars around the globe are so dangerous that it is unrealistic for conflict photographers to continue being the independent correspondent capturing the horrors of war on the sidelines. In some countries it is impossible to freely operate as a photo or news journalist because they are now frequently captured and killed by opposing sides, or killed in the cross-fire (so to speak). This factor has actually contributed to a trend in which the work of photographers who experience some kind of brutality while covering a conflict receive more attention than if they had not.

During our conversation, I questioned Ivan about his experience as the “spectator.” The discourse included his perspective on the field: most war photographers document conflict with the intentions of bringing attention to the atrocity. This observation is echoed by Susan Sontag in her book *Regarding the Pain of Others*: “Such images [as those of war] [are] an invitation to pay attention, to reflect, to learn, to examine the rationalizations for mass suffering offered by established powers” (117). LaBianca recounted how there was this part of the process where he wanted to help, though all he had was his camera. His rationalization included that by taking photographs of these stories he would be doing more to help them. Here the role of spectacle in conflict photography becomes an essential part of relaying horror to its audience.

Today the extent of war coverage is subject to judgments about “good taste”—a decision made by newspaper and magazine photo editors. Both LaBianca and Sontag commented on this fact. Generally their decisions can be attributed to controlling public order and morale. Also, while many individuals may object to the censorship, the media will draw the line on the more conservative side. According to LaBianca, conflict photographers can be discouraged that the media won’t publish the more graphic images out of taste because this exclusion leaves an incomplete picture. It is frustrating for those who put themselves at such great risk only to have these images undistributed. He believes that they are trying to control public indignation, or trying to prevent the spectacle by asking the question, “Do we really need to see it?” LaBianca says, “When people see an image, it can define a situation for them so the media makes decisions based on what image will define a particular conflict for the public.”

With this idea in mind, even while those in charge of the media might claim they are trying to control one thing, that being public outcry, they are still controlling and using the spectacle as a vehicle because they are certainly diverting attention towards a particular conflict. The objective of the media is to bring the public to one conclusion or another about a particular situation. Even the most noble of photographer’s intentions cannot be translated in their photographs, for those influencing the whims of our culture give it its own life in order to support the objectives of mass media. By increasing the amount of coverage of one conflict (and in turn potentially under-covering another) the perceived level of importance of that conflict grows.

In terms of the aesthetics of the photographic trends, the level of experience of the photographer does not determine the effectiveness of their photograph. In fact, the element of finesse to a photograph that a professional touch might bring actually seems to decrease the effectiveness. It could be theorized that the roughness and lack of aesthetic value of an image

gives it a perceived weight of authenticity. Beautiful and disturbing images become more uncomfortable to look at because where before we saw the gruesome details now we are also attracted to the aesthetic value. We want ugly, horrible things to look ugly because then we are not as aware of our own attraction to violence, and particularly, the disturbing intersection between violence and beauty. There is also the modern phenomenon of Photoshop, an extremely popular and commonly used image-altering platform. Someone says, “You’ve got to see this!” and upon looking, we claim that it has been “photoshopped,” a term synonymous with altering photographic truth. The appearance of an unclear image seems to (albeit temporarily) lend credibility to the idea that it was not digitally manipulated.

Alongside the changing nature of the media is what our culture of spectacle has done to the field of conflict photography. The availability of mobile devices and always-improving efficiency of various Internet platforms contribute to the increasing amount of imagery appearing on the Internet uploaded by random bystanders or soldiers of one kind or another. This is also decreasing the need to adhere to standards of taste, for where an editor might object to a graphic image, the bystander does not hesitate to upload this photo or that video. Websites such as YouTube have contributed to the recognition given by society to the power of the citizen’s witness. This raises questions about the validity of concerns for issues such as taste when many websites host any number of violent images or video<sup>3</sup> and are not only free but are viewed by thousands and even millions. There is an addictive sense of positive reinforcement for sharing your information by the lure of attracting viewers, because to have more viewers means you have more attention which means you matter. Major news outlets frequently run information that was first found on sharing sites. According to LaBianca, bystander images have become so

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<sup>3</sup> While Youtube is a video platform, many “channels” upload images that are part of videos through the use of looping still images.

ubiquitous that entire news photography teams have been disbanded. This decision is related to the more commercial motive by media channels, “What image will sell?” for where there used to be a small journalism team, now anybody with a cell phone or digital camera has become the journalist. Sontag notes: “War was and is the most irresistible—and picturesque—news.” (49). You could definitely say here that conflict or violence of *any* kind, whether that is domestic violence or international combat, is what attracts the most attention.

One recent example of the effect mobile platforms and the Internet can have on the dissemination of information about war are found in the case of the images of Abu Ghraib. This particular instance was certainly different in that the concerned photographer did not capture it. These pictures are certainly, however, considered war photography. The images were snapped on the cell phones and digital cameras of soldiers; while this was not an ongoing battle, this is part of the dehumanization effect of war. They are shocking because they are a different kind of victory; a role reversal for the victor. Here the “terrorist” is helplessly victimized and the soldier becomes the terrorist in the acts of torture by humiliation. The soldiers within the pictures have already won in the battle within these walls. According to Brian Wallis, the chief curator for the International Center for Photography, the photographs broke from the accepted vocabulary for news photographs, and it is this unawareness of any established code of honor that might be the principle ethical difference between the amateur and the war photographer. Even more important might be the fact that these images came from soldiers, individuals actually involved in on side of the conflict, whereas photographers frequently capture the pain and horror of either side. In an article she wrote for the New York Times entitled, “Regarding the Torture of Others,” Sontag explains:

A digital camera is a common possession among soldiers. Where once photographing war was the province of photojournalists, now the soldiers themselves are all photographers—recording their war, their fun, their

observations of what they find picturesque, their atrocities—and swapping images among themselves and e-mailing them around the globe. (“Regarding the Torture of Others”).

The description of soldiers documenting their lives could describe any person in contemporary society today—recording by photo and video our daily activities has become a normal part of our everyday culture, and not just recording, but recording and sharing.

Every day we are exposed to a relentless stream of vulgar imagery. The idea of censorship for taste brings to mind the fear of over-exposure or desensitization. Where we might claim the risk of being too frequently exposed to violence and acknowledged the need for tasteful censorship, we vigorously defend our right to exposure to violence in entertainment. Maybe it is the right to creativity, or the right to shock others. When it comes to entertainment the public are far, far more willing to open these boundaries, because it is part of the illusion and thus the distraction that comes with entertainment. Images taken from combat lines filter down through time, informing history lessons, discussions, philosophy, books, and movies.<sup>4</sup>

While the risk for over-exposure is arguable, a question remains: do people want to be horrified? Yet if they did not want to be horrified, what can explain the current context of entertainment that also strives to bring about these emotions? To refer back to the concept of spectacle pedagogy, there is the idea that we must be exposed to images which produce various emotions in order to understand where our boundaries lay and how we feel about certain things. This claim does not establish a quantifier for this exposure, just that we must be exposed to a simulated version of such an event in order to understand how to prepare for that real-life event. It does not also account for instances where people censor themselves because of an awareness

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<sup>4</sup> One example of the use of war photography to inspire movies was in the case of Steven Spielberg’s blockbuster film *Saving Private Ryan*. Actual photographs taken by Robert Capa on D-Day inspired the cinematography. Sontag points out: “That war photography seems, retroactively, to be echoing as much as inspiring the reconstruction of battle scenes in important war movies has begun to backfire on the photographer’s enterprise” (77).

of their own taste: does this mean that they do not understand how they feel about the images which they have self-censored? Presumably by the time a person has reached adulthood they have viewed sufficiently enough images in order to understand how they feel towards violence. In a culture that reinforces the spectatorship of image and video watching from the comfort of a chair, it seems much more likely that in real-life events we would behave in a similar manner: as spectators.

The answer to the question, “Do we want to be horrified?” might be found if we look back at the original definition of spectacle. Cultural critic bell hooks suggest that there are those of us who consume visual culture to be entertained and there are those who seek it out to learn something (Garoian and Gaudelius). Potentially both definitions could apply to all of those who participate in visual culture, but the increasing onslaught of images intends to make us the former. At some point in the barrage, it stops becoming informative and starts becoming entertainment. At the same time, we are stuck at an intersection between censorship and over-exposure with the fact that war is a constant reality: if we reduce the amount of images that we view does that reduce the level of awareness of the suffering of others around the globe? It is not easy to make conclusions about these questions. As Sontag puts her rationalization for war photography:

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. (*Regarding the Pain of Others* 115).

## Notes

1. It was during the 1960s and 70s that the genre of “social documentation photography” became a more relevant and recognized field. The photographer Cornell Capa defined “the concerned photographer” as an individual whose images are intended to educate and change the world and in so doing, would bring about humanitarian change (source: <https://www.icp.org/>: “the concerned photographer”).
2. Interestingly, Nick Ut’s career transition from photographing horrific war to Hollywood celebrities such as Paris Hilton whilst in mid-crisis (Source: [www.asap.ap.org](http://www.asap.ap.org)).
3. While Youtube is a video platform, many “channels” upload images that are part of videos through the use of looping still images.
4. One example of the use of war photography to inspire movies was in the case of Steven Spielberg’s blockbuster film *Saving Private Ryan*. Actual photographs taken by Robert Capa on D-Day inspired the cinematography. Sontag points out: “That war photography seems, retroactively, to be echoing as much as inspiring the reconstruction of battle scenes in important war movies has begun to backfire on the photographer’s enterprise” (77).

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*War Photographer*. Dir. Christian Frei. First Run Features, 2001. Film.

A photograph of a war-torn camp at night. In the foreground, a soldier in a camouflage uniform and cap is crouching, looking towards the camera. In the center, a woman in a black dress is embracing a shirtless man who has a red and white striped cloth wrapped around his head. To the right, another woman in a camouflage dress is drinking from a bottle. In the background, a shirtless man is taking a selfie, and an American flag is hanging on the wall. The scene is lit with warm, low-key lighting, suggesting a social gathering in a military camp.

# War and Spectacle

A Closer Look at the Spectacle of War Photography

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# Spectacle

- Spectator-Photographer
- The Culture of Spectacle in America
  - Media and Taste
  - Spectatorship of the Audience

Spectacle: something exhibited to view; unusual, notable or entertaining, in particular anything eye-catching or dramatic; an object of curiosity or contempt

# Spectator-Photographer

- Historical development and objectives
- Today: A literal observer in conflicts
- Thinkers: Susan Sontag

Interviewed: Ivan LaBianca

- Photographed during the civil war in Libya in June and August-September 2011
- Intentions
- Ethical Issues

# The Culture of Spectacle in America

- Guy Debord: “The Society of the Spectacle”
- Jean Baudrillard: “System of Objects”, “The Consumer Society”, etc.)
- Chris Hedges: Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle

“...we characterize the ideology of visual culture as “spectacle pedagogy” in that images teach us what and how to see and think and, in doing so, they mediate the ways in which we interact with one another as social beings.”

-Garoian and Gaudelius



Eddie Adams



Ron Haeberle



Ron Haerberle



Ron Haeberle



Ron Haeberle



Ivan LaBianca

Photo Source: <http://ivan.labianca.org>



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# War photography, the media, and the audience

- Photo Editors choose which photographs are published based on “taste”
- Still images have the ability to influence how a nation will define and feel about a conflict
- The amount of coverage a particular conflict receives also impacts the audience’s perception of the importance of that conflict.
- One example of support for censorship: Some fears have been voiced over the concern or fear of over-exposure and desensitization to violent imagery.
  - The prevalence of violence within entertainment in our society

# The Aesthetics of Suffering

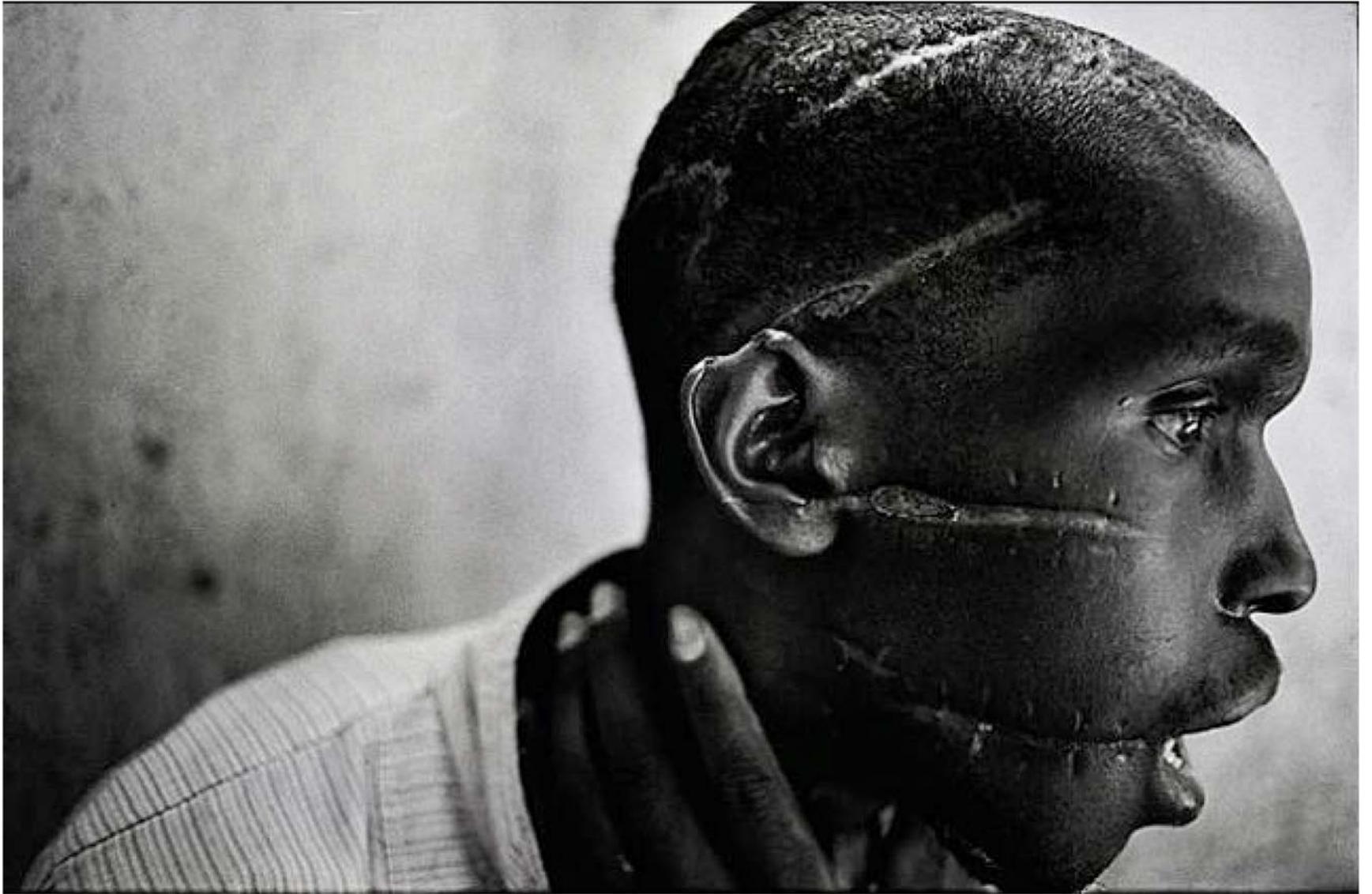
- What is memorable to the audience
  - Suffering is frequently represented in painting as a spectacle because it cannot be stopped, and so is only watched
- Rougher images versus more finished or edited
- The unsettling effect of both repulsion, shame and attraction to a moving image
- The common appearance of dying or dead bodies
- The objective of trying to find a more successful image
- How does the appearance of war photography inform entertainment in our society?



Chris Hondros

Photo Source: <https://www.nytimes.com/>

“War was and still is the most irresistible—and picturesque—news.”



James Nachtwey



James Nachtwey



James Nachtwey







11 Engage  
12 Proceed





Steven Meisel

“This novel insistence on good taste in a culture saturated with commercial incentives to lower standards of taste may be puzzling.”



## The Witness and the Spectacle

- The unanticipated effect of increasingly available photographic mobile devices and the internet on conflict photography
- “To live is to be photographed, to have a record of one’s life, and therefore to go on with one’s life oblivious, or claiming to be oblivious, to the camera’s nonstop attentions.”
- Press agencies are starting to recognize the power of citizen witness: anybody, anywhere, anytime can photograph and upload images of what is happening around them

Spectacle: something exhibited to view; unusual, notable or entertaining, in particular anything eye-catching or dramatic; an object of curiosity or contempt



“Being a spectator of calamities taking place in another country is a quintessential modern experience, the cumulative offering by more than a century and a half’s worth of those professional, specialized tourists known as journalists.”



“There is the deep satisfaction of being photographed, to which one is now more inclined to respond not with a stiff, direct gaze (as in former times) but with glee... The events are in part designed to be photographed.”



## Questions in conclusion

- Is there a moment in the photography of torment where it stops being informative and starts being entertainment?
- What problems might arise when images of suffering inform the visual information in areas of entertainment such as movies, video games, and other types of photography?
- Is it fair to claim over-exposure for the fear of desensitization in our current society?

“As cultural critic bell hooks suggests, there are those of us who consume visual culture to be entertained and there are those who seek it out to learn something.”

*-Garoian & Gaudelius*