SUSAN SONTAG'S CRITICISMS OF PHOTOGRAPHY APPLIED TO THE IMAGE AND VIDEO ARTIFACTS OF FIVE-YEAR-OLD OMRAN DAQNEESH

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Abstract

The summer of 2016 was host to a devastating air strike in the Syrian city of Aleppo which resulted in the deaths and critical injuries of its citizens. Orchestrated by the Syrian government, the bombings targeted an eastern portion of the city occupied by rebels in the ongoing Syrian Civil War. Activist and photographer, Mahmoud Raslan, captured what has become the iconic photograph of the five-year-old Omran Daqneesh, a civilian victim of the August attack. Revealing the vulnerable Omran as a calm presence in the back of an emergency vehicle, Raslan's photograph concisely illustrates the blind destruction of war. As it is produced and reproduced in the news media, this image has become representational of the multifaceted conflicts ravaging the Middle East and consuming its citizens.

Through Susan Sontag's approach to photography as a means of humanizing war and violent conflict, I analyze Raslan's photograph (and contextualizing video footage) while referencing ways in which it is appropriated by the news media. Sontag's criticisms on war documentation, specifically through photography, resonate with current international affairs, and Raslan's photograph offers a specific example of documentary photography through which this criticism will be employed.

Introduction

The advent of photography and the technology involved initiated a cultural phenomenon of documentation that quickly became commercialized. The ability to create, reproduce, alter, and distribute imagery with photography changed the ways in which the viewer consumes and understands the world. Photographs as objects serve many roles including being subject to collecting, remembering, documenting, and sharing; they can be presented in a display or filed away as records of the past. Ultimately, it is the subject of the photograph that is transformed into an object of consumption.

The photographer is also guilty of this consumption. The act of photographing a subject inherently distances oneself from the subject through the lens of the camera while simultaneously permitting and encouraging the witnessed content. The photographer becomes an observer to a subject or event and places himself outside of the situation. In doing so, the photographer imposes Otherness on his subject, whether intentional or not. This Otherness is most apparent in imagery of violence and war.

Since the American Civil War, images of blood-strewn battlefields and the devastation of conflict have become accessible to the public. Images of warfare, however striking, have become commonplace in news reports, documentaries, and personal collections. With technological advancements of the twenty-first century, images and video can be shared with unprecedented immediacy.

The video and photograph of five-year-old Omran Daqneesh was captured during a government-led raid of the Syrian city of Aleppo in August 2016. Since it's documentation, the original photograph, video, and stills from the video have been shared on social media and throughout news publications. This group of artifacts has become synonymous with a movement

of American empathy for the Syrian people. The photograph has been compared to other artifacts in its inherent elicitation for empathy, and can be critically evaluated for its emotional impact.

In this paper, I will demonstrate how the critical perspectives of the late twentieth-century writer Susan Sontag are directly applicable to the artifacts surrounding the August raid on Aleppo that specifically focus on Omran Daqneesh.

Overview of Susan Sontag's criticisms and beliefs

Susan Sontag was an American writer, screenwriter, director, human rights activist, and critic well known for her theoretical approach to photography. Sontag often wrote and spoke about war, culture and humanitarian efforts in relation to how these ideas are portrayed and shared.[1] One of Sontag's most well-known works is *On Photography*, a collection of essays written between 1973-77, in which she discusses the history and roles that photography fulfills in contemporary culture.

Sontag opens the essay with a comparison to Plato's well-established "Allegory of the Cave." From what seems to be a cynical perspective Sontag insists that the reality of humanity is forever restricted by its own consumption of images. Since the advent of photography in the mid-nineteenth century, the eye of the camera's glass lens has become the same lens through which a person or persons views the world.[2] With this implicit restriction of photography, whether it is conscious or unconscious, humanity is as limited as the inhabitants of Plato's cave whose knowledge of the world exists only as shadows cast on a dimly lit wall.

According to Sontag, photographs are merely components of the observed world. Unlike written or spoken words that can be interpreted or a painting that can be malleable to subjectivity, photographs are not perspectives or opinions; they are fragments from the world

that have become an object entirely separate from the subject being photographed. Emphasizing the object-ness of the photograph as an image, Sontag writes in *On Photography*:

> Photographs, which fiddle with the scale of the world, themselves get reduced, blown up, cropped, retouched, doctored, tricked out. They age, plagued by the usual ills of paper objects; they disappear; they become valuable, and get bought and sold; they are reproduced. Photographs, which package the world, seem to invite packaging. They are stuck in albums, framed and set on tables, tacked on walls, projected as slides. Newspapers and magazines feature them; cops alphabetize them; museums exhibit them; publishers compile them.[3]

Photographs are, by nature, commodities. They can be shared, sold and displayed; they can be utilitarian or merely decorative. Photographs are objects, and subsequently the subjects themselves also become objects. Photographs, and their subject matter, have become victim to manipulation to an equal extent that the viewers of the photographs are manipulated. Particularly in the age of Photoshop, photographers have reached the zenith of image manipulation. In doing so, we have called into question the validity of every photograph to which we lay witness. Regardless, the photograph will remain with "a kind of immortality it would never otherwise have enjoyed" beyond the death of the subject or the ending of the photographed events.[4] The photograph effectively stops time in a fraction of a second and outputs it as a commodity.

Even the act of producing a photograph serves to distance oneself from the subject matter. Sontag calls into question the ethics of the photographer who specifically documents the destruction and horrors of war:

> Photographing is essentially an act of non-intervention. Part of the horror of such memorable coups of contemporary photojournalism…comes from the awareness of how plausible it has become, in situations where the photographer has the choice between a photograph and a life, to choose the photograph. The person who intervenes cannot record; the person who is recording cannot intervene.[5]

Calling into question the very act of photographing a gut-wrenching scene, Sontag points her accusing finger at the photographer. However, one may argue that the journalistic photograph can potentially result in a greater good if that good is a call to action to fight for an encompassing cause. If that is the case, then the burden remains on the photographer to distribute the image in a manner that results in the outcry that such a movement rightfully deserves. This argument raises another question: How does one justify taking a photograph over, potentially, intervening to save a life? How can one measure a human life versus the prospective cultural and political impact of having distributed a photograph? Sontag does not answer this question, and perhaps it remains unanswerable.

She does insist that photography is not action-less. While it may not intervene with an event or subject, it remains a form of interaction. "It is a way of at least tacitly, often explicitly, encouraging whatever is going on to keep on happening. To take a picture is to have an interest in things as they are…including, when that is the interest, another person's pain or misfortune."[6] The very act of photographing implies an acceptance of its subject regardless of the photographer's intent.

Writing for *The New Yorker* in 2002, Sontag addresses photography specifically focused on documenting images of war. "Photographs of an atrocity may give rise to opposing responses: a call for peace; a cry for revenge; or simply the bemused awareness, continually restocked by photographic information, that terrible things happen."[7] A photographer engages with a subject when he creates an image, and this engagement can result in subsequent actions that develop directly in response to the photograph.

Sontag references the first wars in which the technology of photography allowed documentation of combat and its aftermath. "Creating a perch for a particular conflict in the consciousness of viewers exposed to dramas from everywhere requires the daily diffusion and

rediffusion of snippets of footage about the conflict. The understanding of war among people who have not experienced war is now chiefly a product of the impact these images."[8]

In an interview with Caroline Brothers, Sontag is asked if she is making "a case against cynicism and for empathy" regarding the process of documenting specifically war through photography. Sontag confirms the answer, but adds a qualifier: "I also want to show that there are traps in empathy, too. I would talk about the way people think about something horrible that is going on somewhere else and which they know through reports."[9] For individuals who are not directly involved in war, it is through photojournalism that one experiences it. The nature of photography makes it subject to manipulation and distortion in an unlimited number of ways including the context in which it was shown. While a case for empathy should be made in war photography, the viewer should also express a healthy degree of skepticism.

In her interview with Brothers, Sontag also recants her former assertion that images can exhaust an audience, that provocative imagery somehow leads to a desensitized audience. Unlike propaganda, which cleverly appeals to its subjects and never grows old, "image-fatigue" is the notion that an audience can become numb to overuse of given images. Sontag tells Brothers, "[People] don't think reality is disappearing and being replaced by images,"[10] and insists *On Photography* excluded much of the politics that drives her later work. While maintaining skepticism, the possibility remains to express empathy and critically separate documentation from propaganda.

With the development of film as an extension of photography, one may insist that the new media perhaps offers more insight into a given subject. In response, Sontag insists that it is the photograph, rather than the video, that creates a long-lasting impression in the minds of its witness: "Non-stop imagery (television, streaming videos, movies) surrounds us, but, when it comes to remembering, the photograph has the deeper bite. Memory freeze-frames; it's basic

unit is the single image. In an era of information overload, the photograph provides a quick way of apprehending something and a compact form for memorizing it. The photograph is like a quotation, or a maxim or proverb."[11]

History of the Syrian Civil War

While Syria has been the location of modern conflicts for over a century, it was not until 2011 that events erupted into what is now referred to as the Syrian Civil War.[12] In response to the Syrian government's treatment of teenage demonstrators,[13] protesters gathered in the city of Deraa, but were shot and killed when government forces open-fired into the crowd. The repercussions from this massacre rippled across the country. Hundreds of thousands of protestors amassed to stand against the abusive Syrian government and demand the resignation of President Bashar al-Assad.[14] Taking up arms, the rebel forces formed a resistance called the Free Syrian Army.[15] The rebel army responded to the government with violence as battles ensued across the country and Syria descended into civil war. The city of Aleppo became the site of an ongoing battle in 2012 when it was occupied by rebel forces.[16] The civil war has since become complicated by other factors including the religious and political tensions between Sunni and Shia groups and the development of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). In 2016, the BBC reported:

> The conflict is now more than just a battle between those for or against Mr. Assad. It has acquired sectarian overtones, pitching the country's Sunni majority against the president's Shia Alawite sect, and drawn in regional and world powers. The rise of the jihadist group Islamic State [ISIS] has added a further dimension.[17]

According to the United Nations (UN), since 2011, 4.9 million Syrians sought refuge outside of the country, while 6 million more remained displaced in Syria.[18] Over 250,000 Syrian citizens have been killed, and over one million have sustained injury due to the conflict.[19]

What is perhaps the most disturbing outcome of the war are reports of war crimes and rampant violence directed toward civilian populations. The UN reports that civilians have been the victims of attacks including bombings and chemical warfare. The UN has also accused ISIS of forging a "reign of terror" by staging public amputations and executions for offenders of the Islamic State.[20] In May of 2012 the United States listed Syria as one of several political powers that comprise an "axis of evil."[21] The humanitarian crisis in Syria is undoubtedly a cause for civil unrest, and empathetic response has only been elicited through the media coverage of this war.

It was in Aleppo that five-year-old Omran Daqneesh became a fixation of America; the young Omran humanized the seemingly continual feed of reported crises from the Middle East flooding the news media. On the night of August 17, 2016, the Syrian government—with unclear involvement from the Russian military—orchestrated an airstrike on a rebel-occupied portion of the city. In this single attack, three individuals were reported killed and twelve more were injured including the young Omran and his family.[22]

It was during the recovery from this attack that the documentation of the now-iconic image took place. Citizen-turned-journalist Mustafa al-Sarout of the Aleppo Media Center (AMC), a pro-resistance media outlet that reports daily on the war, filmed through the night as recovery efforts went underway following the August attack.[23] This video was later redistributed by the Associated Press and *The New York Times* among other media outlets.[24, 25]

The edited video offers a brief snapshot into the rescue efforts the night of the attack. One first sees a dark shot in an indiscernible location. A rescue worker carries a small child from a height as his vest lined with shining reflective material skews the white-balance of the video camera. The details of the shot are unclear, but the atmosphere is chaotic. Exclaiming male voices are layered on top of each other out of view of the camera. The camera follows the rescue

worker as the faces of tired and horror-stricken citizens are revealed. The rescuer steps into the back of an emergency vehicle that is lit with bright fluorescents from its interior. It is at this point that the video camera's white balance adjusts, and details of the boy's—Omran's—injuries are revealed. The worker quickly plops Omran in an adult-sized bucket seat, and is presumed to return to the search of more victims. This time the camera does not follow the rescue worker, but remains fixed on the young victim. From a location outside the ambulance the camera zooms in on the boy; he remains motionless for a time, watching the group of photographers outside the ambulance. The loud cacophony of voices continues and seems to heighten the stillness of Omran. With his small hand, he begins to wipe his eye, but instantly realizes he is touching something wet and out of place. He wipes his hand against his head in investigation, examines the results for a moment, and passively wipes blood on the seat, all without so much as a word or an outward sign of distress.

The video cuts to a shot of more rescuers, this time with no reflective vests, pulling another child from the rubble and seating him on a gurney in the ambulance. We see that another victim—a young girl—has already been rescued between the camera's edits. Again, the children are alarmingly calm. Next is a shot of rescue workers and an adult victim, covered in debris and head bloodied as he stumbles with assistance towards medical attention. He stops before approaching an ambulance to exclaim to a worker (the only victim in the video to do so), but he is quickly ushered in. The ambulance doors close, and the vehicle speeds away. Over the entirety of this video, the exclaiming voices escalate and sounds of sirens are heard in the distance.[26]

Concurrent to al-Sarout's filming, Mahmoud Raslan, an activist in Aleppo, photographed the same unfolding events. It was his photograph that would make its way to the front page of newspapers in the following days (see Fig. 1).[27]

When one views Raslan's photograph of Omran, one can understand how the image came to stir such considerable empathy in the American media. The young Omran is settled in an oversized seat in the back of an ambulance. Nothing about his body language speaks of the tense prior moments, and he rests his hands in his lap. Every inch of his small frame is coated with fresh dust, debris, and—most alarmingly—his own blood. The viewer can discern the ambiguous signs of a deep wound somewhere to his head, but Omran displays no outward indication of pain. He does not cry; he merely stares with wide, dark eyes that hold a terror only imaginable to most Americans.

His once-colorful clothes are now covered in the gray dust of demolition as they offer a reminder to the age of the young child. Contrasting against the blaring backdrop of emergency-orange, Omran's body has been stained a dull gray as if to visually relate the stain that the Syrian conflict has wreaked on its citizens. Omran sits in silence, alert, but eyes fixed on an indiscernible distance. The camera's field of view is not crowded with paramedics or emergency responders as one may expect. Rather, the young Omran is situated alone and far from the viewer.

The most striking part of this image is Omran's lack of expression. Despite his trauma, despite his erupting surroundings, Omran appears disconnect from reality. He has been rejected by his government and become another tally on their sum of the injured. He has been inflicted by the birthmark of his situation: being only five years old, he was born into a conflict that had already matured. Knowing only a country that is torn by war, he is cast with a composure beyond his years and beyond his own comprehension.

When asked about his photograph of Omran, Mahmoud Raslan told *The New York Times*, "As a journalist in Aleppo, I see thousands of situations like this every day. Omran's case is just one of many for the Syrian people in areas controlled by the opposition. He's just another case

among the many children who are daily victims of the bombing."[28] With such widespread devastation, one wonders how it was this single image of a child that amassed a following that shook the empathy of the American media.

Effects of artifacts after looking at Sontag

Regarding the image of Omran Daqneesh, one must differentiate between three artifacts that were utilized in characterizing the reporting of Aleppo: (1) The photograph taken by photographer Mahmoud Raslan. (2) Mustafa al-Sarout's footage documenting the rescue of Omran. (3) Still images from the same video documenting Omran's rescue. These three different forms of media were shared alongside stories of the August airstrikes in Aleppo to convey the blind rage of war.

Craig Allen, a photo editor for *The New York Times*, wrote a commentary on the American media's fascination with the photograph of Omran. "The photograph is an effective symbol of a war with no winners but very clear losers: the civilians maimed and killed by the thousands as the conflict grinds on."[29] In stark contrast to photographs that show destroyed buildings or overcrowded hospitals, the photograph of Omran focuses on an individual. In doing so, the photograph elicits the comparison between the viewer and the subject; this demonstration of Otherness stirs in the viewer a deep sense of empathy.

Susan Sontag exemplifies this same phenomenon from the Vietnam War in the 1970s. In discussing American interpretations of war through photography, Sontag writes:

> Photographs like the one that made the front page of most newspapers in the world in 1972—a naked South Vietnamese child just sprayed by American napalm, running down a highway toward the camera, her arms open, screaming with pain—probably did more to increase the public revulsion against the way than a hundred hours of televised barbarities.[30]

While memorable, and certainly iconic, the photograph Sontag references (see Fig. 2) was taken by photojournalist Nick Ut. The primary subject, Kim Phuc, screams in agony as the photographer serves to document the unfolding scene. In this horrifying example, one calls in to question how the photographer could witness such events without interfering for the justification of capturing the image. However, Ut's account of the photograph directly contradicts the prior claims made by Sontag in that the photographer inherently allows the photographed events to take place. In a 2005 account of the event, Ut told the BBC:

> I saw people running, calling 'Help! Please help!' As soon as [Phuc] saw me, she said, 'I want some water, I'm too hot, too hot.' And she wanted something to drink. I got her some water. She drank it and I told her I would help her. I picked up Kim and took her to my car. I ran up about 10 miles to Cu Chi hospital, to try to save her life. At the hospital, there were so many Vietnamese people—soldiers were dying there. They didn't care about the children. Then I told them, 'I am a media reporter, please help her, I don't want her to die.' And the people helped her right away.[31]

Ut's account clearly shows that a photographer can both intervene in a situation and document the horrors. Ut gave Phuc water and drove her to a hospital where he insisted the doctors help her. It is this interaction that contributes to the context of the photograph. Without it, the viewer is witness to only a single frame of the entire event.

Similarly, when discussing the photograph of Omran, one must not exclude the video footage captured by al-Sarout. Although edited by the AMC, the footage gives a wider spectrum of emotions in the recovery from the air-strike. One understands the atmosphere of the rescue as the workers scramble to pull survivors of the attack from the rubble; the scene is one of confusion as incoherent shouts are heard from off-screen. The frantic rescuers do not know how many victims are alive or dead, and the fear is apparent in the eyes of the adults we do not see in Raslan's photograph. The photograph also omits the rescue of two other children, both with the same thousand-yard gaze as Omran. Interestingly, it is in the only in this video footage that we

see any outward distress of a victim; the only adult shown being rescued from the rubble is in a state of shock as he stumbles and exclaims at rescuers.

By reducing the field of view from the entirety of the video into a single image, the context is changed, resulting in a changed perspective. Sontag writes, "Photographs of the victims of war are themselves a species of rhetoric. They reiterate. They simplify. They agitate. They create the illusion of consensus."[32] This illusion of consensus—this oversimplification—is extremely apparent in the photograph of Omran. Sontag insists that "The problem is not that people remember through photographs but that they remember only the photographs. This remembering through photographs eclipses other forms of understanding—and remembering."[33] Our culture relies on visual information almost to a fault; and it is the reason that the photograph of Omran was distributed to such a greater extent that the accompanying video. Some media outlets resorted to showing a still from the video rather than the video itself. Sontag compares the three different types of media in *On Photography*:

> …The relation of a still photograph to a film is intrinsically misleading. To quote from a movie is not the same as quoting from a book. Whereas the reading time of a book is up to the reader, the viewing time of a film is set by the filmmaker and the images are perceived only as fast or as slowly as the editing permits. Thus, a still, which allows one to linger over a single moment as long as one likes, contradicts the very form of film, as a set of photographs that freezes moments in a life or a society contradicts their form, which is a process, a flow in time. The photographed world stands in the same, essentially inaccurate relation to the real world as stills do to movies. Life is not about significant details, illuminated a flash, fixed forever. Photographs are.[34]

While distinctly different in terms of the context portrayed, a photograph, video, and still from the same video inherently relate different information to the viewer. Most media outlets explicitly chose Raslan's photograph of Omran without his sister (see Fig. 3). It is unclear why this photograph was rejected when it shows twice as many victims, both of which are children

with similar injuries and shared gaze. Regarding photographing the rescue efforts, Raslan told *Time* magazine:

> While taking the photo and looking at the boy, I was crying, while pleased that I was doing my job and taking a powerful photo…. When I really started to sob was when I saw the eight-year-old sister of Omran. His sister was as calm as him and she had a similar injury in the face and eye. She made me cry ten times stronger. We are humans, we are people. I was crying for the children and fearing that my daughter may go through the same experience.[35]

Arguably, the image with both Omran and his sister should invoke double the empathy of its witnesses. However, this undermines the previous point that it is specifically the focus on the individual that strikes the level of empathy with the viewer.

Regardless, the photograph's effects are clear. Aside from its association to reports from Syria, the image of Omran was used in news stories tied to political movements. In reporting on President Barack Obama's pledge to accept Syrian refugees into America, *Politico* ran a photo of Omran and mentioned, "The picture of Omran Daqneesh, the blood- and dust-covered little boy rescued after an airstrike, has reminded the world of the horror still unfolding in the Arab state."[36] In this usage, the photograph arguably serves to meet political means and push for presidential action.

Two reactions that should not be excluded from the conversation are that of Mahmoud Raslan and Mustafa al-Sarout. Following the circulation of their photograph and video, respectively, Raslan told *Time* magazine:

> I just want to continue standing against injustice. When we took to streets in peaceful protests, people who fled the country betrayed the civilians left behind. I want to continue to document the crimes. I want to stay with the poor civilians who can't flee. I don't want to leave and let my people down. This is my commitment and I feel at peace with it.[37]

In the same article, al-Sarout told *Time*:

> I sat with the video, thinking and wondering what Omran was feeling. After I filmed this video, I gave it to the AMC. They edited it and posted it online. I was so exhausted following that night that I went to bed. When I woke up the next day, all the international agencies and journalists wanted to speak to me. I felt I did something to this revolution.[38]

Although Sontag insists the photographer is inherently divided from the subject through the actual act of photographing, one cannot disregard these accounts. Made public by the media, the accounts of Raslan and al-Sarout offer a perspective of the photograph that contributes to the overall empathic sway of the image by discussing its inherent power. Raslan and al-Sarout express the entirety of the Syrian conflict and remind the reader that—as journalists—they are merely playing a small role in the larger conflict.

Conclusion

The after-image of the artifacts surrounding Mahmoud Raslan's photograph of Omran Daqneesh have echoed American media since the August attack. As Syria continues to struggle in its war with no winners, the image of Omran remains the single—if any—image associated with the conflict. Ultimately, Sontag offers a melancholy and seemingly conflicted perspective towards wartime photography:

> Transforming is what art does, but photography that bears witness to the calamitous and the reprehensible is much criticized if it seems 'aesthetic;' that is, too much like art. The dual powers of photography—to generate documents and to create works of visual art—have produced some remarkable exaggerations about what photographers ought or ought not to do. These days, most exaggeration is of the puritanical kind. Photographs that depict suffering shouldn't be beautiful, as captions shouldn't moralize. In this view, a beautiful photograph drains attention from the sobering subject and turns it toward the medium itself, inviting the viewer to look 'aesthetically,' and thereby compromising the picture's status as a document. The photograph gives mixed signals. Stop this, it urges. But it also exclaims, What a spectacle![39]

Photography sits precariously between the worlds of art and documentation. It is subject to manipulation as well as interpretation. A photograph is a single image can fulfill limitless roles, but Sontag repeatedly insists that it is through the extensive consumption of imagery that contemporary culture understands the world. While some images—particularly striking photographs such as the artifacts documenting Omran Daqneesh—create an uprising of empathy in the American media, the use of the image itself must be critically examined in order to assess its resounding affects.

Figures

Figure 1: Five-year-old Omran Daqneesh in the image that became widely distributed by the American media in the days following the Aleppo attack. Photo by Mahmoud Raslan.[1]

Figure 2: American napalm burns Vietnamese citizens during the Vietnam war. Photo by Nick Ut on June 8, 1972. Property of the Associated Press.[2]

[1] Mahmoud Raslan. August 17, 2016, Anadolu Agency, Getty Images, Accessed March 14, 2017.
[2] Associated Press, "Trang Bang," Nick Ut, June 8, 1972, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/d/d4/TrangBang.jpg.

Figure 3: Omran Daqneesh (left) pictured near his eight-year-old sister (right) after her rescue from the August 2016 attack. Photo by Mahmoud Raslan.[3]

[3] David Bier. "Viral Video Highlights the Need for Private Refugee Sponsorship," *CATO Institute*, August 23, 2016, https://www.cato.org/blog/viral-video-highlights-need-private-refugee-sponsorship-0.

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4. Ibid., 535.

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