Watching Human Rights, or the Ethics of Looking

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Watching Human Rights, or the Ethics of Looking

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Abstract
This essay is an attempt to explore the potential reshaping of the human rights movement through the genre of human rights cinema. To begin with, I will focus on one film in particular, Christian Frei’s The War Photographer, shown at the 2002 Human Rights Watch festival. By contrasting this film with a study that argues against the effectiveness of images in human rights campaigns that encourage citizens to “do something,” I will establish the terms for a debate about the aestheticization of war and atrocity. Then, I examine how Susan Sontag, as well as her intellectual role model, Walter Benjamin, understand the conditions of this debate and exhibit a cautionary hope for a political aesthetics. Finally, by pointing to Jill Godmillow’s film What Farocki Taught I will briefly sketch out ways in which human rights cinema can move beyond a reliance on truth through seeing and towards a rhetoric that recognizes the limits and impossibilities of an over-dependence on the visual.

Keywords: Human rights cinema, War photography, Aesthetics

The War Photographer (2001) opens with the renowned James Nachtwey, the subject of Christian Frei’s Academy Award-nominated documentary, photographing burning thatched-roof huts in an unknown and seemingly unpopulated location. As we follow the un-seen Nachtwey from hut to hut, we hear the clicking of his shutter, the thud of his footsteps, and the steady pattern of his breath. The Swiss micro-camera attached to Nachtwey’s own Canon allows him to carry on with his work without being disturbed by a large film crew. Thus, Frei’s micro-camera, engineered specifically for the film, like Nachtwey’s still camera, is able to participate in making the private effects of war public material.

In a statement written in 1985, which he reads at the end of the film, Nachtwey explains,

“It has occurred to me that if everyone could be there just once to see for themselves what white phosphorous does to the face of a child or what unspeakable pain is caused by the impact of a single bullet or how a jagged piece of shrapnel can rip someone’s leg off – if everyone could be there to see for themselves the fear and the grief, just one time, then they would understand that nothing is worth letting things get to the point where that happens to even one person, let alone thousands.

But everyone cannot be there, and that is why photographers go there . . . to protest and by the strength of that protest to make others protest.”

Nachtwey’s faith in the power of the image and the power of knowledge to encourage others to act is precisely what motivates organizations such as Human Rights Watch, which showed the film at their annual film festival in 2002. Human Rights Watch monitors human rights abuses in many countries and publishes its findings in the international press. The implicit understanding compelling both the publications of the fact-finding investigations and the International Film Festival is that by fostering knowledge about these abuses, one can prevent them from recurring.

The goal of publishing these reports, according to the Human Rights Watch website is to “embarrass abusive governments in the eyes of their citizens and the world.” And, in many regards, its campaigns are successful. While it has obviously not been able to put an end to all human rights abuses, Human Rights Watch claims partial responsibility for many progressive pieces of legislation including an international treaty that bans the use of child soldiers, a multilateral treaty banning landmines, and the war crimes tribunal that indicted Milosevic. Additionally, Human Rights Watch is able to provide documentation and evidence of these and other abuses that hold governments accountable for their crimes.

Yet the goal of the Film Festival is slightly different. If Human Rights Watch wanted to simply expose atrocities in a public forum, it could just read its reports in front of a camera or an audience. Or it could take video footage on its fact-finding missions and make its own documentaries. In selecting films

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1 For a complete version of Nachtwey’s statement see the First Run Icarus Films website: http://www.frif.com/new2002/warp3.html

2 Although Human Rights Watch showcases both fiction and documentary films, a very large percentage of the films accepted into the festival are documentaries. Human Rights Watch also makes sure that the films shown are accurate portrayals of the human rights concerns. In this way, the festival also serves as a publication based on the investigations of the filmmakers. Furthermore, while the festival will not screen films that are factually incorrect, it does not bar films based on the point of view of the filmmaker. Nevertheless, the films exhibited nearly always represent the view of the victims of human rights abuses and not the viewpoints of the governments.

3 http://hrw.org/about/whoweare.html

4 Ibid.
for the festival, Human Rights Watch claims that it “concentrates equally on artistic merit and human rights content.”\(^5\) It wants to “educate and galvanize a broad constituency of concerned citizens” and “showcase the heroic stories of activists and survivors from all over the world.”\(^6\) In other words, the primary concern is not the documentation of the victims as is the case in Human Rights Watch investigations. The films are not to be held up as evidence in a court of law. Their job is twofold: they need to educate the general public and they need to “galvanize,” to stimulate, inspire, provoke. 

The human rights content of the film accomplishes the first task, but Human Rights Watch recognizes that the films need to have a certain aesthetic content if they are to evoke sympathy and, at some point, action from an audience. A list of facts does not necessarily produce feeling, but Nachtegy’s photo of a one-armed, one-legged man bathing his young son in the river does.

The ability of human rights organizations to produce feeling is addressed in a different format by Stanley Cohen and Bruna Seu in their study, “Knowing Enough Not to Feel Too Much: Emotional Thinking about Human Rights Appeals.” Cohen and Seu are concerned with how the “mythical ‘ordinary person’” responds to human rights campaigns that use photographs and text to encourage people to take action, politically or financially. What Cohen and Seu discover through their focus group at Brunel University, England, is that their participants do not deny that atrocities are being committed, but they do not ultimately respond in the way that human rights organizations would like. Their study shows that the images (and accompanying narrations) used by these organizations cause participants to shut off, to resent the “moral nagging”\(^1\) and, in general, to feel helpless and overwhelmed.

In other words, they do not “galvanize” in the way that Human Rights Watch expects of its films. Or, if they do stimulate the viewer, the viewer does not respond. The OED defines the word “response” as “an action or feeling which answers to some stimulus or influence, an observable reaction to some specific stimulus or situation.” Moreover, “response” comes from the same root as “responsible,” defined as “answerable, accountable (to another for something); liable to be called to account” and also “morally accountable for one's actions; capable of rational conduct.” By not responding to the call to action, the viewers are essentially denying responsibility or accountability. Cohen and Seu write, “Humanitarian organizations try to move you beyond knowing by moving you to feel; you should not be able to bracket off, ignore, forget, and go on with your lives”\(^2\). Therefore, while the ad campaigns that they are analyzing may cause the participants to think for a moment, they do not cause them to feel badly, or at least not permanently.

While Cohen and Seu’s participants were shown print ads, or more specifically leaflets from different Amnesty International campaigns, the concerns that they raise can be applied to human rights cinema and certainly to Nachtegy’s war photographs. Although different mediums have varying methods and capabilities of producing “feeling,” one of Cohen and Seu’s general concerns is that their “mythical ‘ordinary person’” is so immersed in a “televisional world that blurs fact and fiction”\(^2\) that reality is often hard to grasp. Events, real or “fake,” seem to be taking place in another world, far away from the Western living room, and can therefore be turned off as easily as the television. To put this argument differently, one might say that modernity, as a centrally visual experience, has numbed us into complacency, and the Western audience cannot be moved into protest as Nachtegy hopes.

This debate is also the subject of Susan Sontag’s Regarding the Pain of Others (2003) in which she both critiques and praises the ability of the photographic image to provoke a moral response. In a sense, this book can be seen as a refinement of her earlier view in On Photography written twenty-six years earlier. There she writes, “The limit of photographic knowledge of the world is that, while it can goad conscience, it can, finally, never be ethical or political knowledge”\(^\text{23-4}\). Likewise, in a statement that directly contradicts Nachtegy’s view of the photographer as peace-negotiator, the younger Sontag claims, “Photographing is essentially an act of non-intervention”\(^\text{11}\). The photographer necessarily has an invested interest in the status quo because that is what provides him with his material. Therefore, his task is to record the way things are and not to change them. Although the moving image has the ability to narrate and thus, for Sontag, effect greater moral persuasion, her concern here is still that, as Cohen and Seu remark, the bombardment of images in general reduces our grip on reality.

But in Sontag’s later work, photographs provide us with access to reality – they are snapshots of the “real.” Furthermore, Sontag writes, 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 senses 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\(^\text{114}\).

\(^5\) http://hrw.org/iff/2004/about.html.
\(^6\) Ibid.
Here, Sontag makes a significant shift in assigning responsibility. If in On Photography it was the responsibility of the photographer or the image to make a moral impact, and the fault of modernity when it could not, the above passage points a finger at the viewer herself. The photograph is the initiative, the invitation as Sontag puts it, to begin to think about the issues. The photograph designates the hell, but it is up to the viewer to squelch hell’s flames. According to Sontag, we no longer have the “right” to innocence and ignorance; we have an ethical responsibility to look at these unpleasant images, even, and especially, while we are flipping through our 250 channels. Sontag recognizes that looking will certainly not always lead to action, or even to an acknowledgement of responsibility, but she maintains that it is nonetheless an important first step.

What distinguishes Sontag’s revised argument from Nachtwey’s, however, is that Nachtwey is motivated and inspired, although by no means naïvely, by the notion that photographs can convince people not to wage war. He states, “If war is an attempt to negate humanity, then photography can be perceived as the opposite of war and if it is used well it can be a powerful instrument in the antidote to war.” But Sontag, who has certainly become more hopeful, does not fully disavow the skepticism of her early years. Regarding the Pain of Others opens with a critique of Virginia Woolf that could also apply to Nachtwey, any war photographer, and, to a lesser extent, the entire concept of a human rights cinema. In Three Guineas (1938) Woolf uses a series of horrific war photographs, sent out by the nearly-defeated Spanish government, in order to engage in anti-war polemics. The destruction shown in the photographs is meant to persuade her reader that the true nature of war is ugly and terrible, that it is a failure of human compassion. The problem with this argument for Sontag is that the photographs themselves do not necessarily convey this message. In fact, they are actually intended to “foster greater militancy on behalf of the Republic” (8) and not to promote peace. Sontag also points out that Woolf’s photographs actually make no statement about the general, overall nature of waging war. What they do show is a very specific war in a specific place. By refusing to engage with the particulars of the Spanish civil war, Woolf precludes any real political interaction, even though hers is an attempt to gender the neutral subject of “human rights.” The problem of photography, therefore, is part of a larger semiotic system that abstracts particulars into universals.

Although Nachtwey’s photographs are generally embedded within a narrative that lends a political context, he too is faced with the problem of the inherent neutrality of the photo. For instance, Nachtwey tells of his experience photographing the Rwandan genocide. One week he photographs the victims of a Hutu massacre, the next week, in a refugee camp, he films sick and malnourished Hutus who may have committed the very massacres he had just documented. But the photograph itself cannot make this distinction; it tells nothing of this story. Even when provided with the context, the viewer may be drawn to sympathize with the Hutus in the refugee camp. In fact, the very logic of liberalism demands that one does sympathize with the destitute and downtrodden. In other words, the photographs are by no means unequivocal decries against war. In fact, if read within a post-colonial context, they can take quite a different nuance: white photographer gives us photos of maimed African bodies; white photographer exposes horror of African-on-African violence; black men kill each other. Photographs, Nachtwey forgets, do not always tell the same story that the photographer does.

In another instance, Nachtwey films Palestinian men slinging rocks (presumably at Israeli soldiers) and being met, in return, with tear gas. The photos themselves show both the anger and determination of the Palestinian men and the crippling effects of tear gas. (Nachtwey himself is doubled-over and completely incapacitated by the gas.) But his photos could be used by either side to promote its cause: for the Palestinians they are photos of courageous heroes fighting for their country; for the Israelis they are photos of dangerous terrorists sabotaging peace. Also writing about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Sontag remarks, “Identity is everything” (10). Or, as she remarks later, photos are a way of remembering, but making peace often requires forgetting.

The problem with the image is that while it can be used to promote peace and to encourage political involvement, it can also be used to aestheticize war. In this way, Regarding the Pain of Others can be seen as a popular, contemporary rereading of Walter Benjamin’s writings on the role of technological art within modernity. Of particular relevance here is the epilogue to Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproduction.” Benjamin makes the crucial, although often confusing distinction, between aestheticizing politics and making art political. The aestheticization of political life, such as Nazi parades, culminates in war and fascism. But political cinema, grounded in a

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8 These same arguments can also be applied to cinema. Although cinema is in a sense a way of providing captions for the photographs, any film is, of course, open to multiple readings. Even a seemingly straightforward documentary can change meaning within in different viewing contexts. A documentary sympathetic to Palestinian resistance fighters might, like the photos from the Spanish government “foster greater militancy” when shown to a group of Palestinians evicted from their homes. When shown at a human rights film festival to liberal Americans it might, however, send a call for peace. And, for a group of Zionists, such a film may be used as an example of Palestinian propaganda or disregard for Israeli lives.
liberation project, is the antidote to the fascist slogan of “Fiat ars – pereat mundus” (let art flourish and the world pass away). Political art is what can save humanity from itself.

However, Benjamin, like Sontag, knows that he is on slippery territory. On one hand, he wants mechanically reproducible art such as film and photography to be the revolutionary weapon of the proletariat and the key to, as well as the result of, true democracy. On the other hand, Benjamin links the film industry to both fascism and capitalism because of the way that it exploits the masses. He writes that the film industry is a “publicity machine” placed in the service of the “love life of the stars” (114), and by promoting inequality and unemployment, capitalism obstructs the masses from taking part in the production of film. Benjamin understands that art can be both the vehicle for mass psychosis, and, at the same time, it can provide public with a certain immunization against this psychosis. His hope is that mechanically reproduced images can be a moral wake-up call that will protect us from the abundance of images that lure us into the empty aesthetic promises of the capitalist or fascist cult.

By miming the shocks, stimuli, and distractions of daily life and by allowing the subject to face the apparatus as an equal, film, for Benjamin, teaches us how to cope with the trauma of modernity. Benjamin writes, “Film, by virtue of its shock effects . . . proves to be the most important subject matter, at present, for the theory of perception which the Greeks called aesthetics” (120). Here, Benjamin returns to the ancient Greek notion of aesthetics that defines the word aesthetikos as “of sense perception” (132, f). Aesthetics, according to this definition, is that which, through the senses, causes one to feel and to take notice in and through a state of distraction.

Susan Buck-Morss observes that Benjamin’s calls for a politicization of art would, if followed through, divorce aesthetics from the realm of “Art, Beauty, and Truth,” and instead “place it within the field of animal instincts” (6, 7). She argues that Benjamin’s politicized aesthetics would liberate aesthetics from its currently alienated state. Her analysis of Benjamin’s final paragraph is worth quoting in entirety:

Benjamin is saying that sensory alienation lies at the source of the aestheticization of politics, which fascism does not create, but merely “manages” (beträgt). We are to assume that both alienation and aestheticized politics as the sensual conditions of modernity outline fascism—and thus so does the enjoyment taken in viewing our own destruction.

The Communist response to this crisis is to “politicize art,” implying—what? Surely Benjamin must mean more than merely to make culture a vehicle for Communist propaganda. He is demanding of art a task far more difficult—that is, to undo the alienation of the corporeal sensorium, to restore the instinctual power of the human bodily senses for the sake of humanity’s self-preservation, and to do this, not by avoiding the new technologies, but by passing through them (4-5).

Benjamin’s project can therefore be seen as one that aims to replace modernity’s current numbness, or anaesthetics à la Buck-Morss, with an art that produces a corporeal reaction. In an age where technology overwhelms the senses and threatens to tear the body to pieces, Benjamin chooses to fight fire with fire.

Buck-Morss suggests that Benjamin proposes to use technology in order to “pass-through” technology, to politicize technology in order to not be destroyed and overwhelmed by it. Sontag claims this same sort of privileged ambiguity for the photographic image: she suggests that we need images in order to prevent us from being inundated by them. In effect, human rights cinema and discourse serves the same function. For all of its flaws, its recourse to enlightenment humanism and individualism, it also is a tool that has the potential to point us beyond its own limits as a political discourse. Thus, I believe that the same cautionary hope Sontag and Benjamin have for the reproducible image can be applied to human rights cinema as a whole. But human rights cinema, like all art for Benjamin, must be “refunctioned” – to borrow a term that Benjamin borrows from Brecht.

Therefore, human rights cinema has an ethical responsibility to be self-reflective; it needs to remind its audience that there are always things that cannot be known, that are beyond seeing. Jill Godmillow’s film What Farocki Taught (1997) – to name just one example – is a film that challenges the viewer to understand the limits of seeing. Godmillow’s film is a shot-by-shot re-enactment of Harun Farocki’s anti-Vietnam War film Inextinguishable Fire (1969), never distributed in the United States, about the production of Napalm B by the Dow Chemical Company. Godmillow shadows and layers images from Farocki’s original and now-decaying black-and-white film over the re-enactment, which she shoots with bright, and deliberately nostalgic, Kodak kodachrome. Her very technique therefore points to the limits of film as both a genre and a technology. Farocki’s original film is both hidden and visible in Godmillow’s remake: the viewer can therefore only partially “know” the original film. Likewise, through the use of Brechtian gest, or over-exaggeration of movement, and deliberately unbelievable acting, Godmillow creates an awareness that what is being watched is not real. At the same time, though, the film makes real the effects of napalm.

Sontag’s essay “Fascinating Fascism” makes a similar claim.
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What Farocki Taught wants us to understand Vietnam, and the complicity of U.S. industry, not only in terms of what one witnesses, but more so in terms of what one feels as both victim and witness. Godmillow’s film therefore embraces aesthetics as “sense perception.” At the beginning of the film a man (in the original it is Farocki himself) says, “If we show you what napalm does, you’ll get mad and your feelings will get hurt. If your feelings are hurt, you’ll feel like we are turning the napalm back on you.” In a superimposed image, Farocki then proceeds to burn his arm with a cigarette, as the American actor tells us that a cigarette burns at 400 degrees, while napalm burns at 3,000 degrees. The point then is to turn the napalm back on the viewer – the film wants to provoke a response that ultimately forces us, especially as American viewers, to think about our responsibility. On the contrary, the burning huts at the beginning of The War Photographer, or even Nachtwey’s famous photos of the workers in the sulfur mine, allow us to view these images within a certain comfort zone. Frei does not want to hurt our feelings; in fact, the film has at times a feel-good tone: it is about James Nachtwey, the heroic photographer who brings us images from far away places precisely so that we don’t have to go there ourselves.

In the final monologue of What Farocki Taught, a man tells us that he works in a factory that manufactures vacuum cleaners, which, when re-assembled, become automatic rifles. He then proceeds to switch his scenario around several times so that we are never quite clear as to whether the factory is actually manufacturing vacuum cleaners or automatic weapons: the division of labor, it is noted, makes it so one doesn’t even know what he is making. From this standpoint, Nachtwey’s assumption that his photographs will lead to peace seems presumptuous at best. The point of the final scene of What Farocki Taught is to again turn the napalm back on the viewer by pointing out that seeing, as well as telling, is a complicated process, a process that cannot always tie things up in a neat package. In contrast to typical human rights cinema, What Farocki Taught draws our attention to the invisible, to what cannot be seen, but, at the same time, asks us to learn to look, to find the automatic rifle within the vacuum cleaner. When Sontag remarks that the photographic image can be a beginning, a start, she shifts the moral responsibility of the image onto the viewer. Likewise, human rights cinema, if it is to do more than merely draw our sympathy or disgust, must be able to embrace an ethics of looking that challenges modernity’s reliance on the visual.

Bibliography


About the Author

Lindsey Simms is a Graduate Student in the Department of Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature at the University of Minnesota and an Assistant Editor for the journal Cultural Critique. She is interested in questions of nationalism, globalization, human rights, aesthetics and critical theory.