HAS CONCERNED PHOTOGRAPHY A FUTURE?

PHOTOJOURNALISM, HUMANITARIANISM, RESPONSIBILITY

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Speaking to you as a consumer/analyst of visual imagery, and one who is particularly concerned about how such imagery makes the social and political world possible.

The case I want to make today is that photojournalism – which I take to include news photography, and what others have called documentary, editorial, social or concerned photography – has a particular responsibility and a particular opportunity to both represent the world better and make better worlds imaginable.

At the same time, I want to discuss a series of contexts – conceptual, cultural, corporate and political contexts – which are riven with double binds, populated by paradoxes and characterised by contradictions that make the exercise of photojournalism’s responsibility perhaps increasingly difficult.

However, the end result of this analysis will not be a series of proposals calling on photographers to do things differently – being located outside the industry, that would be presumptuous. Rather, what I will try and leave you with is a diagnosis of our shared contemporary condition and how a reflexive approach to the production of
visual imagery representing that condition might offer a way of negotiating the limitations that bind us all.

Let me say something about this idea that photojournalism has a ‘particular responsibility’. I’m not talking issues of personal morality. When Kevin Carter’s famous Sudan photograph of the starving child with a vulture in the background was published in The New York Times in 1993, the paper was inundated with calls from distressed readers asking in accusatory fashion whether Carter had helped the young girl. From the comfort of their NY residences, these readers had projected their own sense of inadequacy onto Carter in a way that muddied the role of the photojournalist.

In contrast, the responsibility about which I am talking concerns the role – however minor – we all play in making the world possible.

The presumption of this sense of responsibility is that rather than regarding the world as an independent entity the meaning of which we only have to somehow decipher, we should view the world as something brought into being by various practices of representation, of which visual imaging is especially important. In this sense – in the words of anthropologist Allan Feldman – we should regard the event as not that which happens, but that which can be narrated.

In the narration that constructs an event, pictures, and the way they are published and circulated, are of pivotal importance. At the same time, the narration that constructs an event does not necessarily bring us closer to reality. Indeed, there is a profound paradox here. An event can only be an event if it is reproduced, but it is precisely this reproducibility (and the way the reproductions have to rely on generic
styles and symbols) that prevents us from experiencing and understanding the event in anything but a heavily mediated manner.

I'll be using some photographs from Darfur in Sudan later to help illustrate this point. But for the moment let me say that this is what I would call the conceptual context for photojournalism. And it presents us with a challenge.

The challenge is that appreciating the role of visual imaging in the construction of the event means we can no longer rely on the notion of objectivity as a foundational support for the legitimacy of photojournalism.

Objectivity has been central to the way photography and photojournalists have understood themselves throughout the last century or more. How often do we hear ourselves or others say something like ‘the pictures only show what was there’ as though they were no more than copies of the real. It is this sense that led Roland Barthes to regard photographs as “certificates of presence” and for Susan Sontag to describe how they appear to be “found objects.”

Indeed, photography has become so naturalised many have forgotten the numerous moments of mediation involved in transforming a three if not four dimensional, multi-coloured and infinitely ambiguous reality into a two dimensional, often monochrome, fixed commodity. The end result still offers a powerful sense of immediacy, but it is an immediacy produced by mediation rather than being unmediated.

However, for many cultural critics, to argue that the human sciences in the last fifty years or so have seen the demise of objectivity as the guardian of legitimacy and truth is akin to advocating a licentious attitude of ‘anything goes’.
[What the new Pope had in mind when he warned against “a dictatorship of relativism
. . . that recognizes nothing definite and leaves only one’s own ego and one’s own
desires as the final measure.”]

The fear is that if we accept the impossibility of objectivity then we have to accept
that it is ok to fabricate and thus falsify events. This is misplaced with regard to
photography.

Photography’s distinction has always been – and should remain so, in my view – that
it has a connection to the world outside imagination. The world is not an
unproblematic reality and that connection is not that of an unmediated copy. But
there is still some force to the notion of “indexicality” even as we problematise the
notion of the index. The event and the world may not be a foundation for truth, but it
still offers limits on lies.

Which brings me to the particular opportunity photojournalism is presented with at the
moment.

Our current global context is one of permanent war, an on-going state of emergency
and seemingly endless humanitarian crises. Injustices are proliferating, but a
combination of military strategy and media corporatisation has meant the image of
conflict available to us is being severely restricted – despite the proliferation of
television channels through cable, digital and satellite.

While most people get their views of the world from television, there is on TV less
international news to get. The decade prior to September 11 saw the major US
television networks shrink the budgets, personnel and airtime for international
coverage. Driven by a combination of declining audience interest and increasing
costs for foreign coverage, TV networks slashed the number of their foreign bureaux and broadcast one third as many minutes of foreign stories in 2000 as they did in 1989.

The situation in a country like Britain is similar. The total number of hours of factual international programming has declined by 40% in the last fifteen years, with factual programming on developing countries down by 50%. Moreover, the content of ‘factual’ programmes today increasingly blurs the boundaries of news and entertainment, with travel and wildlife documentaries making up the bulk of the output. Similar trends in print media.

When hard news does escape these restrictions, it reinforces stereotypes. As one historian has argued, “Africa is a continent already imprinted with its own peculiar photographic iconography.” It is this iconography that has meant 80% of the British public picture the developing world solely in terms of “doom-laden images of famine, disaster and Western aid”.

It was hoped that the shock of 9/11 was going to reverse this situation. The collapse of the Twin Towers jolted news executives into thinking that “hard news, even foreign news, [was] back in vogue.” However, if September 11 was a watershed for international media coverage, especially on US television networks, it was short lived and soon flooded by commercial considerations. The resultant network newscasts, cable news and talk radio broadcasts were notable for what Michael Massing called “the thinness of the reports, the absence of creative news judgement, the shameless jingoism, [and] the weepy self-absorption.” Not to mention the promotion of a culture of fear.
All this has been achieved principally by the media corporations. But western militaries have played their part. For the invasion of Iraq, the media management strategy that combined “embedded journalists” (given real time access but in limited locations) with briefings given at the Coalition Media Centre in Qatar (hundreds of kilometres from the action) meant that the staged tabloid reports of Pte Jessica Lunch’s “heroic rescue” could obscure accounts of civilian casualties.

This logic reaches its culmination in the sight of the indicted national security advisor in the Reagan administration, Oliver North, working as an embedded war correspondent for Fox News (now the most watched cable news network in the US, with a slogan of being ‘fair and balanced’!) during the Iraq invasion.

Indeed, the interweaving and interdependence of the military, media and information industries is neither an unforeseen accident nor a failure of nerve on the part of the participants (especially the media). This blurring of what previously appeared to be distinct domains is the core of the new military strategy that results from the “Revolution in Military Affairs” (RMA) that has preoccupied the Pentagon for some time.

The RMA is concerned with how networked information technology is integrated into and changes the battlefield for the US military. This means that ‘the battlefield’ is not just a place where military units operate in distant locations. The battlefield is something that surrounds us at all times. We now find ourselves located within – not just the ‘military-industrial complex’ President Eisenhower warned Americans of in 1961 – but what one analyst has called a “military-industrial-media-entertainment network (MIME-NET).” While the interaction of civilian and military technologies is not a recent development, what is new about MIME-NET, Der Derian argues, “is the power of MIME-NET to seamlessly merge the production, representation, and
execution of war...It represents a convergence of the means by which we distinguish the original and the new, the real from the reproduced." *Well beyond objectivity!*

This seamless merging of production, representation and execution comes about because “the new wars are fought in the same manner as they are represented, by military simulations and public dissimulations, by real-time surveillance and TV live-feeds. Virtuality collapses distance, between here and there, near and far, fact and fiction.” As a result, the battlefield is now global and inclusive, overriding previous boundaries between the military and civilian, combatant and non-combatant, participant and observer. In such a world, the military’s restrictions on the media, and the demise of news programmes in the face of entertainment alternatives, intimate relations between Hollywood, universities and the national security establishment, and the conduct of military operations for their information outcomes and representational value in the struggle for strategic influence are the norm rather than the exception.

Despite the pervasiveness of this new strategic environment and the scale of the challenge, puncturing the de-humanising logic of the RMA offers an opportunity for photojournalism.

While the Biafra conflict – so memorably photographed by Don McCullin amongst others – was probably the last war in which photojournalism scooped TV to bring news from the front, the immediacy and ubiquity of TV reporting now means that the still image has what Sontag called “a deeper bite” with respect to understanding and memory.
Indeed, I think that photojournalism can be an instrument of humanitarian intervention in contemporary conflict even as the concept of humanitarianism has been appropriated by the leading military powers to justify their recent interventions.

Photojournalism is well suited to be an instrument of humanitarian intervention because documentary photography itself has humanitarian roots.

We can’t overlook they way photography generally was part of the industrialisation and expansion of the state in the 19th century. Photographs helped construct both the state’s population and the threats to that population. Government, police, prisons, asylums, schools and charities depended in this period on the evidence provided by photographs.

Although central to state power, photography also challenged state power. In the hands of middle class operators (at last in the Anglo-American tradition), photography sought out deprivation in order to improve it.

Jacob Riis, for example, worked with Teddy Roosevelt (before he was president) to improve urban ghettos. Riis was proud of the ‘artless’ quality of his images, which were presented in lecture-slide formats (with titles like “The Battle with the Slum”) where issues of health, hygiene and order were presented pictorially.

Lewis Hine, likewise, allied his work to groups like the National Child Labor Committee in the early 20th century, thereby contributing to the establishment of child labour laws. Hine wanted to make obvious the gap between American rhetoric and reality, and understood his images to be part of a larger, overall story. Designating his practice “social photography” Hine wanted to establish a particular form of communication, using every permutation of the picture-text marriage – photo-
Unsurprisingly, political opponents derided his picture stories as “fakes,” a theme I will return to at the end.

In the 1930s, photojournalism’s humanitarian ethos found its voice in two arenas.

Internationally, it was connect to Popular Front movements and the struggle against Franco in the Spanish Civil War. Photojournalism’s stylistic concern with people was a manifestation of a humanism that was ideologically at odds with the forces of authoritarianism and totalitarianism then on the march in Europe.

Domestically, photojournalism was allied to the state liberalism of reform in the Depression era, most notably through the Farm Security Administration’s documentary project, a novel national venture which spawned some of the best known photographers’ of the 20th century. The work of people like Dorothea Lange helped influence Congress to legislate rural reform.

The impact of these images was enabled by popular publications. Life was founded (1936), and along with Vu in France and Picture Post in the UK, it provided a mass media outlet for such images – something lacking today.

Significant as it was, the humanitarian ethos of photojournalism in this period should not be overly romanticised. It was the social conscience of a liberal sensibility that very much wanted to reform a system rather than fundamentally challenge or change a system.
Sometimes it was also quite patronising and paternalistic. The FSA project, for example, was explicitly about eliminating class differences rather than challenging class structures. A 1935 diary entry from Rexford Tugwell, the FSA photographic founder, revealed his purpose. “There is very little sympathy” for “the poorest agricultural folk” who the FSA intended to “help out,” Tugwell wrote, so “it must be one of our first considerations to try always to conciliate public opinion so that we may go ahead in the effort to lift the levels of living of these people.” *Echoes to development NGOs and perhaps NGO photography*.

Moreover, the FSA was not immune to nationalist appropriation. In 1942 the FSA’s Historical Section-Photographic was transferred to the Office of War Information, and then director Roy Stryker demanded more uplifting and patriotic images of Americans from his photographers.

Notwithstanding that, photojournalism in this period was very much allied to the Progressive ethos in the US, which advocated a form of state liberalism. Above all else, it was premised on making problems visible so that good people would then wish to remedy the issues observed.

The ideological project of state liberalism waned with the end of the New Deal consensus and the onset of WWII and, despite the many successes of post-WWII photojournalism, the focus on liberal causes and social reformism has to a large extent given way to a fascination with the everyday and its appearances, something that is not inconsistent with consumer culture in our era. The fact that photography is more amenable to showing the individual as opposed to the collective has only reinforced this.
All of this raises a fundamental question…if we were to revivify photojournalism’s humanitarian ethos in the era of global neo-liberalism, network centric warfare and the permanent emergency, what photographic form and style would enable a new progressive stance?

Of course, a good many photographers in this room and a good deal of the work showcased by the World Press Photo awards embody much of the humanitarian ethos of photojournalism I have been talking about, regardless of their position on particular issues.

But I want to argue that notwithstanding the desire, intention, record or wishes or specific photojournalists, the way in which their work gets used can have effects contrary to a progressive humanitarian ethos.

The point that needs to be stressed here is that photography is not purely visual – its meaning and function comes from context, which includes the context of the image’s production, publication, reception and use.

To illustrate this, I want to consider a series of recent photographs from Darfur, taken by Panos photographers Sven Torfinn, Dieter Telmans and Jerone Oelmans.

(I want to acknowledge here the considerable assistance Adrian Evans and the staff of Panos Pictures in London provided me in sourcing these photographs – while absolving them completely of responsibility for my interpretations of these images).

Let’s think about the situation in Darfur, Sudan since 2003.

Part of a larger context of conflict in Sudan and North Africa since 1956.
But even in the last 18 months we’ve seen the development of a humanitarian crisis:

- 2 million people displaced by fighting
- Between 70,000 and 180,000 killed as a result of this fighting
- Rape as a weapon of war
- Widespread looting of property

The media, governments and even NGOs have erroneously seen the Darfur conflict as being an “age-old ethnic conflict” in which “Arabs” are at war with “Africans.”

But…Darfur’s Arabs are black, indigenous, African and Muslim - just like Darfur’s non-Arabs. The fighting is a response to 20yrs of marginalisation and ‘Janjaweed’ attacks. It is the culmination of local conflicts over land and water, especially in the wake of droughts, made worse by the absence of an effective police force in the region for 20 years.

The conflict is demonstrably not ‘ethnic’ or national or racial, which means that while it has comprised some appalling crimes against humanity and war crimes, neither is it a case of genocide.

The issue though is, how can this be pictured?

How it is often pictured…

[Daily Telegraph front page – generic photo, stereotypical, linked to universal humanism and charity]
Are there better images?

[Show Torfinn series]

Commissioned by *The Guardian* in London. From hundreds of images shot on location in 2004, 91 of Sven’s photos are available on the Panos web site. Of those 91, the series here are among the best sellers – with the last image of the boy reaching out from his destroyed house – the single best seller. We can get, therefore, a sense of what the press has wanted from Sven’s photos to represent Darfur.

Sven shows rare instances of battle casualties.

[Dieter Telmans 2003 photo used 40x by UNICEF in fundraising]

[Jeroen Oelmans 2004 photo – and how used on front page of Guardian with headline]

[James Nachtwey’s prize-winning Time photo essay]

All excellent images. All compelling when viewed in a series.

All foreground the personal code – using individuals, often in close up, as the locus of the image. In the absence of special measures to counter this, the personal code implicitly decontextualises and depoliticises the situation. *Perhaps the most common theme and problem with documentary.*
[Hine and “frontality” as a democratic, intersubjective, problematising style – making objects into subjects who stare back with some dignity and pride if not accusations]

When viewed individually in their various publications, however, it's hard not to conclude that they can be read as perpetuating the dominant disaster iconography of Africa, where individuals are pressed up against the lens as victims.

[One question is, how different are these images from pictures important to photography’s past? Photography emerged as a technology central to the development of anthropology and the power of colonialism – it helped fix and objectify the native in a way that secured racial hierarchies. Show two 19th century anthropology images. The intentions of contemporary individuals are of course radically different. But, have we come far enough from this sort of representation? Can we say that photography is now post-colonial? Or does it (inadvertently?) still reinforce colonial relations of power?]

It is not the photographer’s personal responsibility, nor the images fault, but we have to recognise their amenability to situations and readings that run counter to the larger political context they could portray.

Darfur is not a “tragedy”. Darfur is not “another disaster in Africa.” Darfur is a crime – indeed, a series of war crimes committed by people in Darfur and tolerated if not encouraged by people beyond Darfur. How can we picture that?

If ‘concerned photography’ has a future worthy of its past, then it is going to have to be able to address if not answer that question in relation to any number of humanitarian crises.
Conclusion

Certainly as used in the media, the pictures’ inability to represent the war crimes committed in Sudan demonstrates again the significance of context. In relationship to images, context involves three dimensions:

First; the economy of display, wherein the meaning of images is produced by the intertextual relationship of captions, titles, surrounding arguments and sites for presentation.

Second; the economy of ‘taste and decency’ whereby the media itself regulates the representation of death and atrocity (general aversion);

Third; the economy of indifference to others (especially others who are culturally, racially and geographically foreign),

Because of the interplay of these three contextual dimensions, Darfur does not regularly figure in a way consonant with its political situation. When it does pierce the veil of ignorance, it does so in a way that confirms Sudan’s status as one of the world’s ‘hollow belied’ places, or as just another of the seemingly natural tragedies that befalls a “dark continent."

The absence of a war crimes narrative to emplot the relevant events and issues in Sudan prevents new meanings from developing. Pictures alone will not change the situation in Sudan. But the absence of photographic presentations conveying something other than the pathetic victims of famine and conflict, as though the crisis were a natural disaster, can only help to perpetuate the current crisis.
Above all else, it is the significance of social context for the creation and consumption of pictorial meaning that we have to be concerned with. The same pictures can mean different things at different times because of different concerns and different contexts of publication. Indeed, the dominant social understandings existing at the moment of production and reception are more important than the specific form or content of the image for the creation of meaning. When combined with issues of context that relate to the presentation of the image – the economy of display – the power of images cannot be said to result from qualities internal to the picture. *All of which poses a profound challenge for photographers given that it’s only the quality of the image itself that they control.*

Nonetheless, images do bring a particular kind of power to the portrayal of death and violence. Seeing the body and what has been done to it is important. Images alone might not be responsible for a narrative’s power, but narratives that are un-illustrated can struggle to convey the horror evident in many circumstances. Of course, there would be much to worry about if the media indulged in the simple proliferation of disturbing images. Making war pornography available for mass consumption would not address the concerns raised here.

But the particular iconography of disaster, particularly in Africa, produced by a combination of the dominant economy of display, the social economy of taste and the media system of self-censorship with regard to violent imagery perpetuates the economy of indifference to others – and is aided and abetted in this by MIME-NET. This constitutes a considerable injustice with regard to our collective understanding of the fate of the other, something that photojournalism, amongst other representative practices needs to address urgently.