Horrific Blindness: Images of Death in Contemporary Media

David Campbell

Taking its cue from an exhibition of lynching photographs produced in 19th and 20th century America, this article explores the issue of how death is imaged in contemporary media accounts of atrocity. Drawing on examples from Israel-Palestine, Sierra Leone, South Africa and the Sudan, this article highlights the importance of social context in the construction of pictorial meaning. It argues against conventional views that see the media as replete with images of death and thereby contributing to a diminution in the power of photography to provoke. Instead, this article maintains that the intersection of three economies (the economy of indifference to others, the economy of "taste and decency" whereby the media itself regulates the representation of death and atrocity, and the economy of display governing the details of an image's production) means we have witnessed a disappearance of the dead in contemporary coverage which restricts the possibility for an ethical politics exercising responsibility in the face of crimes against humanity.

Lynched Bodies

Southern trees bear strange fruit,
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze,
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

Pastoral scene of the gallant south,
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,
Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh,
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh.

Here is fruit for the crows to pluck,
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,
For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop,
Here is a strange and bitter cry.

(Margolis 2000, p. 15)

Strange Fruit evokes a practice and an era that seems long past in contemporary America. As one of that country's first protest songs, Billie Holiday's 1939 recording of Abel Meerpol's poem is a seminal statement of racial politics in American popular culture that has had many iterations. Numerous performers after Holiday have re-recorded the song or sampled its lyrics, academics draw upon it in college classes, judges cite it in legal cases, and politicians quote from it in speeches, though none have altered the original words. All seek to draw on its unvarnished portrayal of lynching in the South to make a statement about contemporary social issues (Margolis 2000).

Lynching has returned to America's consciousness in recent years, and this return recalls moments in the genealogy of *Strange Fruit*. Around 1930 Meerpol was exposed to a graphic photograph of a lynching that took place in Marion, Indiana. Haunted for days by the image he wrote a poem about it, first published in January 1937 with the title "Bitter Fruit" before being set to music and performed by Holiday in 1939 (Margolis 2000, pp. 36–7). Photographs have again provoked an awareness of lynching, this time through an exhibition and publication entitled *Without Sanctuary* that records the death, mutilation and display of people lynched in the United States between 1883 and 1960 (Allen *et al.* 2000).[1] The images compiled in *Without Sanctuary* record the deaths of only a small fraction of the total number of victims of extralegal violence. Between 1882 and 1968, there were 4,742 recorded lynchings of African Americans, with the likelihood of a larger number of unrecorded deaths. While the victims of lynchings were predominantly black, they also included Jews, white convicts, Hispanics, Native Americans, and Asian and European immigrants, the latter of whom were sometimes murdered because of their union involvement. And while the majority of lynchings took place in the South of the US, they were not unknown in the North, as evident by the lynching which inspired Meerpol to write his poem (Litwack 2000).

The photographs in *Without Sanctuary* are brutal. The victims' bodies have been broken, burnt, disfigured, dismembered and strung up. The experience of their death confronts the face of the viewer. No concession is offered to emotional sensitivity, and there is no use of abstraction or metaphor to signal what has taken place. Even more notable than this directness is the fact that many of the photographs show the white men who carried out the lynching standing around the corpse. Aware of the camera, they are sometimes accompanied by a crowd of on-lookers, including women and children, taking in the scene. The lynching photographs thus display the killers and their victims in the same manner as hunting pictures depict hunters showing off their prey.

The impunity with which lynching mobs recorded their deeds shocks us today, but are a product of the social circumstances surrounding the killings. Lynching, amazingly, was a social ritual attended by vast numbers of people who created

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1. An annotated presentation of the photographs, along with a movie narrated by James Allen, the collector who compiled the exhibition, can be found at
http://www.musarium.com/withoutsanctuary/main.html

a festive atmosphere. Often the killing would be advertised in advance. For example, *The Memphis Press* of 26 January 1921 carried on its front page a report in which it was said the crowd "May Lynch 3 to 6 Negroes This Evening" (Smith 2000). As a public occasion, lynching required photographic recording to ensure its status as an historical event persisted long after the victim's death. The photographers who produced the lynching photos were not simply spectators to the killing but part of the lynching, integral to the public status and social meaning of the murder. The images they produced were printed in newspapers and made into postcards (often embossed with the photographer's name and business address) that circulated throughout the United States, sometimes as warnings to potential victims, but in many instances simply for use as personal notes (Allen *et al.* 2000). One journal recorded the various elements at work in an account of the 1915 lynching of Thomas Brooks in Fayette County, Tennessee:

> Hundreds of kodaks clicked all morning at the scene of the lynching. People in automobiles and carriages came from miles around to view the corpse dangling from the end of the rope … Picture card photographers installed a portable printing plant at the bridge and reaped a harvest in selling postcards showing a photograph of the lynched Negro. Women and children were there by the score. At a number of country schools the day's routine was delayed until boy and girl pupils could get back from viewing the lynched man. (Litwack 2000, p. 11)

The lynching photographs were popular because they functioned as "icons of white supremacy" that dramatized the racial and gendered cleavages of a social order in which "blacks were terrorized, white women were vulnerable, and white men were on top, invulnerable and free" (Rushdy 2000, p. 70). However, these photographs could also serve other purposes, especially when appropriated by the victim's family. When Emmet Till was lynched in 1955, his mother did not hide her son's body and insisted on an open-casket funeral so the congregation could witness for themselves the violence of Till's death. Photographs of Till's battered body were published, and readers of black-owned newspapers in which they appeared wrote in support of their appearance and the anger they generated. A photo essay of the Till lynching in *Jet* magazine mobilized many young African-Americans, some of whom went on to become student leaders in the civil rights movement (Rushdy 2000, pp. 72-3). This appropriation demonstrated that by the late 1950s shifting social attitudes manifested in the civil rights movement had altered the way lynching pictures were produced, used and read. As the public ritual of lynching attracted more wide spread condemnation, photographs of the murders became increasingly rare. Moreover, those that did appear showed the once confident killers now hiding behind masks and avoiding public display of their quarry (Rushdy 2000, p. 73).

Not that the act of lynching itself disappeared. In June 1998, three white men killed James Byrd in Jasper, Texas. Reporting on the trial of one of these men, John William King, in February 1999, *The Guardian* described via the prosecutor's statement how Byrd died:

> The three men picked up Byrd, an unemployed, disabled vacuum cleaner salesman, at 2.30 am, as he was walking home along Martin Luther King Boulevard.
>   They stopped for cigarettes before heading out of town and down a secluded logging track. It was there that they beat him, sprayed his face with black paint, and chained him by his ankles to the back of Berry's pick-up.
>   Prosecutor Guy James Gray told prospective jurors that Byrd was "not only alive, he was conscious at the time, and he was using his elbows and body in every way to keep his head and shoulders away from the pavement."
>   He told them how Byrd was alive during the three-mile death ride until his head and shoulder hit a storm drain and he was beheaded. His torso was left in front of an African-American cemetery "as some form of a message". (*The Guardian* 1999)

Pictures of Byrd's body were shown by the prosecution to the jury during the trial of King. According to Ashraf Rushdy (2000, p. 74), those photos were unsparing in the suffering they conveyed: "his knees, heels, buttocks, and elbows were ground to the bone; eight of his left ribs and nine of his right were broken; his ankles were cut to the bone by the chains that attached him to the truck. A pathologist testified that Byrd's 'penis and testicles [were] shredded from his body'", all prior to the moment he was decapitated and finally died. Jurors found the pictures horrendous, and had to force themselves to look (Rushdy 2000, p. 77). The images were central to the trial in East Texas, and helped a jury of eleven whites and one African American find King guilty and sentence him to death (Vulliamy 1999).

The function of the photograph in provoking different understandings of atrocity like lynching—from the original postcards collected in *Without Sanctuary*, to the image that led Meerpol to write the words for *Strange Fruit* and inspire other civil rights activists, and the police pictures that led to the conviction of James Byrd's killers—provides a platform from which to review some of the important issues surrounding the imaging of death in contemporary media. This article begins to address some of these issues by asking, how is death portrayed in accounts of contemporary atrocity, and what are the political effects of such representations? Are the pictures we witness able to engender a response sufficient to the crime portrayed?

Disappearing Bodies

To begin, let us return to the contemporary lynching of James Byrd in Texas. Despite the shocking story of Byrd's killing, and its evident newsworthiness, none of the photographs of Byrd's body have ever been published in the public domain. Indeed, few if any in the media have even seen the photographs of Byrd's body used by the prosecution in the trial of his killers. As a result, the accounts of Byrd's lynching have been illustrated with word pictures drawn from the trial testimony, or made graphic with photographs that represented indirectly the crime. The most direct American example of this was the *Boston Globe*'s picture

of dried blood on the road along which Byrd's torso had been dragged (Rushdy 2000, p. 75).[2]

The disappearance (or non-appearance) of Byrd's body demonstrates that the media does not seize upon every opportunity for the display of death. It has become something like conventional wisdom to argue that media depictions of horror are commonplace, testimony to a commercially driven voyeurism by an immoral (if not amoral) industry. However, the fact that the public has been prevented from seeing the evidence of a contemporary lynching indicates otherwise. The failure to publish the available photographs of Byrd's body suggests the media, rather than always being voracious and voyeuristic, is at least sometimes cautious and discreet:

> Displays of the horror and hurt of bodies are a measure of the industry's mix of prurience and rectitude. The press errs on the side of caution in depicting death and destruction. It is careful to write more detail than it dares to show and often uses the metonymic power of photographs to remove harm from flesh to objects. When the press decides to picture bodies, the imagery tends (with notable exceptions) to be restrained. Newspapers do not revolt audiences for the sake of it. On the contrary, disgust forms a small part of the stock-in-trade and papers use it sparingly. (Taylor 1998, p. 193)

Indeed, as John Taylor makes clear in his analysis of how the British media handle horror, this apparent sensitivity when it comes to imaging death stems from industry standards governing the pictorial representation of death and violence. These standards reflect in part informal norms of decency and propriety. But they also involve formal codes devised and regulated by bodies in the UK such as the Press Complaints Commission and the Broadcasting Standards Commission. These formal codes are said to represent reader's and viewer's preferences, and readers and viewers generally want to be shielded from images of violence—"I don't want to see these photos while I eat my breakfast", is a standard complaint in response to even the coded images of horror that newspapers use (Mayes 1999; Rushdy 2000, p. 74). These standards are aided and abetted by in-house regulations enforced by media producers themselves, such as the BBC's *Producer's Guidelines*, which prescribes the particular circumstances under which images of death could, if at all, be used (Taylor 1998, p. 5). All in all, these standards have effectively enshrined a system of censorship by and for the media with respect to the depiction of death and violence.

The disappearance of Byrd's body can be seen as part of a larger trend in the media coverage of violent death. The Vietnam War gave rise to numerous images of bodily violence, many of which were credited with changing public perceptions of the fighting and, eventually, undermining public support for American involvement. Notable in this respect were Eddie Adam's photograph of a Viet Cong suspect being executed on the streets of Saigon, and Huynh Cong Ut's 1972

2. This photographic style is not uncommon. For example, in September 1996, *The Guardian* published a photo showing a trail of smeared blood on the front steps of a terrace house to illustrate the police shooting of an IRA suspect. The photograph is reprinted in Taylor (1998, p. 88).

photo of the Vietnamese girl fleeing a napalm attack. However, since the Vietnam War, governments have gone to considerable lengths to make such images, and the reactions they might provoke, difficult to come by.

During the Gulf War of 1990–91, for example, the US authorities established complex structures for reporting which prevented the relative freedom of movement enjoyed by the media during Vietnam. The "pool system", whereby only a small number of accredited journalists had access to the military in general and the front line in particular, gave the Pentagon the ability to restrict unwanted stories by slowing down publication. Indeed, these structures meant that the transmission times for stories from the battlefield exceed the 24 hours it took accounts of the Battle of Bull Run to reach New York during the Civil War, more than 100 years previously (Fialka 1992, p. 2). One effect of these arrangements was the almost total disappearance of the dead from coverage of the Gulf War (Taylor 1998, pp. 157–174). This sanitized environment meant that when the body of the dead reappeared controversy ensued, such as in the case of Kenneth Jarecke's photograph of a charred Iraqi corpse still upright in his vehicle that *The Observer* published shortly after the end of hostilities. For most newspapers issues of taste easily trumped the significance of this photograph and editors refused to contemplate its publication (Taylor 1998, pp. 167, 181–183).

This disappearance of the dead was also evident in much of the television coverage of Bosnia, though it was the media's own restrictions rather than military restrictions which most shaped coverage. The BBC's guidelines about what could and could not be shown in news reports effectively prevented images capable of representing the nature and extent of ethnic cleansing from making it to the screen. This led the BBC's principal correspondent in Bosnia, Martin Bell, to complain publicly that he was unable to report the reality of the Bosnian war. The censorship of "good taste" was, in Bell's words, leading the BBC to prettify and sanitize the war (Taylor 1998, p. 75). One of the ironies of the war in Bosnia is that the bodies we could not witness at the time of their death have returned with a vengeance in reports subsequent to the end of the fighting. Newspaper stories of the on-going war crimes trials at The Hague, for example, are being amply illustrated with photographs of the mass graves now being uncovered. The contorted figures of decomposed bodies are returning to remind us of the crimes previously hidden and denied (Norton-Taylor 2000).

This combination of official reporting structures and media sensibilities combined in the coverage of both the US-led invasions of Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) to further entrench sanitized reporting. From the mix of embedded journalists and cameramen, official briefings, violence against reporters in the field, government bans on filming particular events (such as the ceremonies at Dover air force base in Delaware to mark the return of American dead from Iraq) and media sensitivity about the portrayal of death has constructed an image of these wars that is far from complete (Campbell 2003b, pp. 102–107, 2004, pp. 59–64; Lewis 2003; Wells 2003; Younge 2003).

Seeing Bodies

Why should we lament the disappearance of the dead? Why do we need to see the body? In the case of war reporting, following Martin Bell, one concern is that the disappearance obscures the fact that, "War is real and war is terrible. War is a bad taste business" (Taylor 1998, p.75). But over and above this generalized sense of truth telling as an essential part of the portrayal of violence, we need to see the corpse and what was done to it, as Rushdy has argued with respect to James Byrd, because, "It is possible that pictures of graphic violence still have to power to make an impression" (Rushdy 2000, p. 77). Just as the images of Emmet Till provoked an awareness of violence against African Americans, and an African American response to that violence, so to the photographs of James Byrd "could also turn the tides of history once again." How those photographs are used, and what context is chosen in which to deploy them, is vitally important. But their absence from the public domain has not diminished racism, prevented Byrd's killers becoming martyrs of the white supremacy movement, or stopped copycat crimes (Rushdy 2000, p. 76; Harden 1998). If their absence has not prevented such negative consequences, we can say that their presence through publication could not have been held responsible for furthering these problems. Publication could thus have had some positive benefits for the struggle against racism. Likewise, images of war dead could be the basis for mobilization against atrocity and violence. In this sense we can endorse Rushdy's view that "images of terror—used responsibly—can foster a climate in which terror is no longer tolerated" (2000, p. 77).

This sense of the continuing power of photographs to provoke runs counter to the common view that proliferating pictures of atrocity creates compassion fatigue. This view holds that because the media is supposedly awash with images of death and horror, readers and viewers have been increasingly turned off by such pictures, and official policy has become increasingly resistant to calls for action. In Susan Moeller's (1999, p. 35) estimation, "threatening and painful images cause people to turn away, and since the media prioritize bad-news images, this tendency may partially account for American's compassion fatigue."

Moeller's assurance is misplaced. Predicated on the questionable assumption that the media always pictures the worst, it focuses on governmental policy as the register of compassion. This overlooks the contrary evidence derived from the public response to charity appeals. The tens of millions of pounds donated to the Disasters Emergency Committee's consolidated national appeals in Britain shows that while state practice often appears lethargic in the face of disaster, public empathy, driven by powerful images, is anything but exhausted (Disasters Emergency Committee 2003).

The source of this belief about photographs and compassion fatigue can be traced back to Sontag's famous 1977 essay *On Photography* (Taylor 1998, p. 23). For Sontag, her discovery in 1945 of a book portraying the victims of the Holocaust was "a negative epiphany" for the then 12-year-old (Sontag 1990, p. 19). Because they conveyed a horror at the limits of her comprehension, a horror not

subsequently experienced by Sontag, she concludes that photographs themselves have increasingly anaesthetized the experience of atrocity: "At the time of the first photographs of the Nazi camps, there was nothing banal about these images. After thirty years, a saturation point may have been reached. In these last decades, 'concerned' photography had done at least as much to deaden conscience as to arouse it" (Sontag 1990, p. 21). While conceding that "photographs can and do distress," Sontag nonetheless maintains "the aestheticizing tendency of photography is such that the medium which conveys distress ends by neutralizing it. Cameras miniaturize experience, transform history into spectacle. As much as they create sympathy, photographs cut sympathy, distance the emotions" (1990, pp. 109–110).

For some, the *Without Sanctuary* exhibition of lynching photographs has had a similar effect—a limit quickly reached, beyond which the atrocities depicted become simply pictures than end up normalizing the horrible (Staples 2000). But that reaction is far from universal, as the *New York Times* critic made clear:

> These images make the past present. They refute the notion that photographs of charged historical subjects lose their power, softening and becoming increasingly aesthetic with time. These images are not going softly into any artistic realm. Instead they send shock waves through the brain, implicating ever larger chunks of American society and in many ways reaching up to the present. They give one a deeper and far sadder understanding of what is has meant to be white and to be black in America. And what it still means … Horrific as they are, these photographs are a kind of gift, the gift of knowledge, the chance for greater consciousness and caring. That they were made so openly reflects the unquestioning presumption of white supremacy but also preserves that presumption in all its brutality for us to know anew. (Smith 2000)

The compassion fatigue critique confuses a number of issues (state policy versus public empathy, for one). Moreover, insofar as it draws on Sontag's argument, it begins from a dubious premise. Because Sontag was never cut again so sharply as when she was 12 viewing the photos of Bergen-Belsen and Dachau while browsing a Santa Monica bookshop, she believes it is photographs *per se* which have lost their power. For Sontag, the repetition (whether as exact copies or generic icons) of such photographs means that all images of atrocity have become increasingly banalized. However, Sontag's personal appropriation of photographic epiphany denies this power to anyone else seeing those images for their own first time, or anyone else viewing any other images for the first time (Taylor 1998, p. 18).

That said, the often generic quality to certain atrocity photographs—such as the generic famine image of the starving African baby's face, staring pathetically into the camera lens, with flies buzzing around the child's nose and mouth—does run the risk of diminishing the sense of horror about the circumstances portrayed. However, to hold the pictures themselves solely responsible for this effect is to miss the important point that images never exist in isolation. Not only are they made available with an intertextual setting—where title, caption and text surround the particular content of the photograph—they are read within an

historical, political and social context. Indeed, the lynching photographs of *Without Sanctuary* demonstrate above all else how the changing nature of this context radically refigures the meaning of the image. Whereas the postcards of lynchings were produced by and for white supremacists when the racial superiority of white over black was the societal norm in the US, they are being interpreted now within a context where such racism has lost its majoritarian support (if not its social significance). As a result, these photographs "can be made public again only because now we ask them to carry an utterly different meaning than they once did—an outcry against racism rather than a reinforcement of it" (*New York Times* 2000). We are dealing here, therefore, with issues of cultural translation and transgression, whereby the same image does contrary work in different settings because of changes in the conditions of reception.

That Sontag would maximize the import of the image as a thing-in-itself and minimize the significance of context in assessing the power of the photograph is surprising. After all, Sontag has made it clear that "a photograph that brings news of some unsuspected zone of misery cannot make a dent in public opinion unless there is an appropriate context of feeling and attitude." Indeed, she argues that "photographs cannot create a moral position, but they can reinforce one and can help build a nascent one" (1990, p. 17). It is this second line of argument that Sontag develops in her most recent book on the power of photography, where she disavows her earlier view that media saturation leads to political inaction: "People don't become inured to what they are shown—if that is the right way to describe what happens—because of the *quantity* of images dumped on them. It is passivity that dulls feeling" (Sontag 2002, p. 102). By placing emphasis on the condition of reception (widespread passivity), Sontag challenges both the compassion fatigue thesis, and the notion of "the CNN effect" (whereby the broadcast of atrocity images is said to change government policy). With regard to inaction in Bosnia despite the steady stream of images of ethnic cleansing that made their way out of Sarajevo, Sontag argues that people didn't turn off because they were either overwhelmed by their quantity or anaesthetized by their quality. Rather, they switched off because American and European leaders proclaimed it was an intractable and irresolvable situation. The political context into which the pictures were being inserted was already set, with military intervention not an option, and no amount of horrific photographs was going to change that (Sontag 2002, p. 101). Taylor summaries the issue well:

> If photographs fail to induce action, the fault lies not with photography but with the larger system which provides viewers with victims and then presents them as "under", "outer", or otherwise "marginal" to "normal", centered society, while punishing them either directly or through moral inaction and indifference. The indifference of people to the suffering of others is not an effect of photography but a condition of viewing it in modern industrialized societies. (1998, p. 148)

One of the conditions of viewing photography (especially news photography) in contemporary society is the system of self-censorship discussed above, whereby media outlets invoke notions of taste to shield readers and viewers, many of

whom demand to be shielded by criticizing even the circumscribed images of death made available to them after the media factors in questions of decency.[3] This produces a curiously self-referential situation, for the tactful elision of horror that stems from the media's reticence to offend means the public response to images of atrocity is against pictures that have been anaesthetized in anticipation of this response. That is, by bowing to the public pressure to be shielded from the pictorial representation of death, the media relies upon metaphoric and metonymic images which obscure the full nature and extent of horror, so that—especially in the social context of these horrors being distant and foreign—the photograph cannot easily provide the full accounting of horror that might provoke a strong reaction. Reading the resultant quiescence on the part of readers and viewers as a product of the picture itself, rather than an outcome of this regulated economy of taste, is to miss the network of practices through which the image's relative power is restricted.

Foreign Bodies

When dead bodies do feature in the media, they are more often than not bodies of dead foreigners. And more often than not, images of dead foreigners are little more than a vehicle for the inscription of domestic spaces as superior, thereby furthering the "cultural anaesthesia" produced through media representations of the other (Feldman 1994). But on occasion a photograph of a foreign body that differs from the norm is published. The film of the death of a 12-year-old Palestinian boy, Mohammed al-Durrah, contains one such image.

   Mohammed al-Durrah was shot by Israeli troops at the Netzarin crossroads in Gaza on 30 September 2000. Huddling with his father against a wall in order to escape the live fire being exchanged by Palestinians and Israeli soldiers, al-Durrah's death was captured for television by a Palestinian cameraman working for a French network. Although Mohammed al-Durrah was pinned down during 40 minutes of gunfire, a handful of frames show his death. At first, the boy and his father squeeze themselves against a wall and behind a water barrel. Then Jamal al-Jurrah reaches back to shield his son, before turning to the cameraman to shout something. Mohammed al-Durrah is screaming in fear while his father gesticulates towards the Israeli guard post from where the fire is coming. At that point the film shows the worst—bullets hit father and son. The final frame—which has appeared subsequently as a single, haunting image—shows the father badly wounded, unconscious and slumped against the wall, a line of four bullet holes behind his head. His son lies dead, across his lap (Goldenberg 2000a).[4] When

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3. Following the death of the British celebrity Paula Yates, the following letter appeared in *The Guardian*: "the choice of front-page photograph to accompany your report on the death of Paula Yates demonstrated a lack of taste and respect. Most of us understand how bodies are removed. A picture of a body bag hardly adds to the sum of human knowledge" (Parker 2000, p. 21).

4. Six frames are reprinted in Goldenberg's (2000a) article; three of them can be seen, along with the article at http://www.guardianunlimited.co.uk/galleryguide/0,6191,377275,00.html

screened as a television sequence, it disturbed millions of viewers, and brought a (contested) admission of responsibility from the Israeli army (Goldenberg 2000b, 2000c). In its subsequent publication as a still photograph, it has become a symbol of suffering circulating worldwide. As a frozen moment of horror, the photo of Mohammed al-Durrah says much about the violence in the Occupied Territories.

The directness of the photograph of Mohammed al-Durrah's death is rare. As such, it can be contrasted to another powerful image from the renewed violence in the Middle East. Two weeks after Mohammed al-Durrah was murdered, Vadim Norzich and a colleague—two reservists in the Israeli army—lost their way in Ramallah and were captured by an angry crowd of Palestinians. Their captors held aloft a poster of al-Durrah and his father, with images taken from the television coverage of their death. After Norzich and his fellow reservist were bundled into a Palestinian police station, a crowd stormed the building and attacked the men. In a frenzy of violence described by the Israeli prime minister as a "cold blooded lynching," Norzich was pummeled to death. From the television coverage of this incident came another single, horrific image, albeit one in which the body is absent. As a metonym for death, we see a young Palestinian man at the upstairs window of the police station. His arms are raised triumphantly, and he shows his blood-covered hands to the appreciative crowd below (Goldenberg 2000b). Eventually the burnt and mutilated bodies of Vadim Norzich and his colleague were returned to Israel, but no photographs of them were published. "Use your apocalyptic imagination to figure out what they looked like," said an army spokesman (Goldenberg 2000b).

The combined effect of the photographs of Mohammed al-Durrah and the killers of Vadim Norzich is likely to be the extinguishment of hope about the prospects of a resolution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Moreover, the sense of balance that comes from linking the two underscores the limited opportunity for optimism (Corbin 2000). However, images of dead foreign bodies are not always produced or used in this way. A remarkable, and truly horrendous, set of photographs from the violent civil war in Sierra Leone (which were reported in the American media the same day that Mohammed al-Durrah was murdered) demonstrates that pictures from an unlikely source can have unlikely effects.

Media images of the conflict in Sierra Leone have focused on the brutal aftermath of the fighting, most notably the way members of the anti-government Revolutionary United Front (RUF) have dismembered and maimed many, especially children. While television often takes pride in its capacity to present live images of violence, in Sierra Leone it has only succeeded in recording the consequences of that violence. So it is something of a reversal for still photographs to emerge that show the violence in process. Yet this is what a cache of 180 photographs captured from an RUF photographer reveals. Among them are pictures of a man being dragged into a field and shot; a photo of smiling soldiers gathered around the severed head of a victim, staring resolutely into

the camera's lens; and various images of broken bodies prostrate on the ground, with their tormentors towering over them.[5]

In many respects, the photographs resemble the lynching photographs exhibited in *Without Sanctuary*. Each set has the same ghoulish purpose of showing hunters with their prey. And just as with the lynching photographs, the Sierra Leone images were produced by someone party to the killing. They were taken, not by a visiting journalist, but by an RUF photographer tasked with the job of recording the violence of rebel forces. As such, they now exist as evidence of war crimes. Having been safeguarded for seven years by a former captive of the RUF rebels, the Sierra Leone photographs were handed over to the US embassy in Freetown, before being made available to the United Nations tribunal investigating crimes against humanity committed during the civil war. That the question of justice is the framework within which these photographs are being rendered is important. Without such parameters, the image of leering Africans displaying openly the severed head of a victim would achieve little more than a perpetuation of colonial stereotypes about barbaric and uncivilized natives. Framed instead as an issue of international criminal activity and responsibility in the context of war, the photographs possess a different meaning.

Other examples of disturbing images showing foreign bodies exist. In one, the video footage of a white South African police unit setting dogs upon black illegal immigrants as a training exercise, combines elements of the Mohammed al-Durrah and Sierra Leone cases. As with the RUF photographs, the perpetrators of the violence, who clearly enjoy what they are doing, take the images. The pictures show the victims screaming in pain as the dogs tear into their flesh. In the background—in a manner that would have not have been out of place in the lynching photographs—the police are seen encouraging the dogs, while laughing and taunting the people as "kaffirs." The camera then dwells upon the wounds the dogs have inflicted (McGreal 2000; Beresford 2000). As with the Mohammed al-Durrah photograph, the pictures of the dog attack existed originally as a video sequence from which still images have been isolated and turned into disturbing photographs. As with both the prior examples, the South African video provoked a public controversy that raised questions about the context of violence in which the pictures were produced.

The filmed death of Mohammed al-Durrah, and the perpetrator images of the RUF war crimes in Sierra Leone and police racism in South Africa, were able to create controversy because they were shown. In each case, regardless of who took the pictures, a wider public was able to view them after they were screened

5. An American journalist reporting in Sierra Leone uncovered the photographs (Junger 2000). In the United States, ABC World News Tonight and ABC Nightline carried extensive reports of the pictures on 29 September 2000 (ABC Nightline 2000). Thomas Keenan posted transcripts of these two ABC reports on the Justwatch List: see http://listserv.acsu.buffalo.edu/archives/justwatch-l.html, 2 October 2000, message 903. Despite its concern for the photos, the ABC coverage conformed to standard media practices for portraying violence: Peter Jennings warned viewers that the images would disturb them, though remarked "maybe [they] should;" while the Nightline presenter acknowledged that they would be showing "the 13 least gruesome" so as not to overly offend.

by broadcasters and printed in newspapers. That the potential power of an image depends in the first instance on its public circulation seems an obvious point. But what is not obvious is why some images and not others make it through the various layers of the media industry, across the desks of the many producers and editors involved in making a story possible, and finally onto the screen or the page. Why, for example, did ABC News use the RUF photographs, but not the graphic video footage of atrocities in Sierra Leone taken by freelance cameraman Sorious Samura? Samura, who won the 1999 Rory Peck Award for his courageous coverage of the appalling violence in Freetown of both the rebels and the West African "peacekeepers" who defeated them, could not find an outlet for his report.[6]

Whatever the particular explanation might be for such contrasting fortunes, it will have to be an explanation that highlights the political economy of the news image as a pivotal context. Broadcasters in the UK have reduced their current affairs and documentary programs substantially; coverage of developing countries is down by more than 50% in the last ten years. Those program outlets that do remain have been shifted to the margins of the viewing schedule, further restricting audiences. Much of the remaining programming dealing with the South centers on the tourist industry and wildlife features, and ignores social and political concerns (Stone 2000; Vidal 2002). Standing in both a cause and effect relationship with this context are the cuts to broadcasters current affairs budgets. Not only have these financial restrictions meant less coverage, they have changed the way in which much of the coverage that exists is produced. Broadcasters often do not send their own personnel to cover conflicts, relying instead on the large news agencies such as Associated Press and Reuters to provide the pool images. However, those agencies are increasingly shunning the experienced and qualified freelance cameramen and photojournalists, who can investigate the stories as well as take the images. In their place, the agencies are subcontracting local sources to supply footage. Because they are often inexperienced, the locals hired to provide images can be at risk from this out-sourcing. For example, one small picture agency gave teenagers in Grozny $400 each if they provided pictures of the troops occupying the Chechen capital, something Maggie O'Kane (2000, p. 9) criticized as "Russian roulette for television."

Hidden Bodies

There are many situations that could serve as an example to highlight the horrific blindness that afflicts much current affairs coverage. There are, sadly, too many conflicts and crises that go uncovered, their crimes largely unknown to the wider

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6. To make clear what had been censored by the failure to show Samura's report, at the 1999 award ceremony, the Rory Peck organizers "decided not to spare the audience, made up largely of heads of British news networks, American news bureaus, news agencies, and freelancers. Following the formal program was a screening of 12 minutes of uncut video deemed too bloody and gruesome to be shown on news programs" (Owen 1999).

world. But one stands out for the way in which its appearance on the world's visual radar occurs within a frame that masks a more disturbing story.

War in the Sudan, Africa's largest country, has been on going for more than four decades. Since the early 1980s, and especially after the overthrow of President Nimeri in 1985, the struggle between the authorities in Khartoum and the Sudanese People's Liberation Army in the south has produced devastating famines (African Rights 1997). Amongst the more than two million dead in the world's longest running "civil war" are the hundreds of thousands of people have perished because food resources have been part of the currency of power. The Bahr el Ghazal famine of 1998, which killed 250,000 in the south-western region of Sudan, was only one of the most recent consequences of this wider conflict (Human Rights Watch 1999).

The media coverage of the Bahr el Ghazal famine was short-lived in its intensity, lasting no more than a couple of months in June and July 1998. The media coverage required the clichés of famine photographs—"the BBs," or children with bloated bellies being held by the mothers, or fed by western aid workers—to present the story to a world audience ignorant of the context in which famine is produced (Moeller 1999, p. 35). The cruel irony is that such coverage of conditions in Bahr el Ghazal was possible only *after* the worst of the food shortages had eased. By the time vulnerable members of the community were dying, and thus made available for media stereotypes, the worst was over and relief (whether locally derived or internationally available) had arrived.[7]

Such conventional media coverage of famine has the effect of reproducing an understanding of Sudan as being "one of the hollow-bellied places of the world" (Salopek 2000). This meaning is well represented by a famous photograph the *New York Times* published in March 1993. Taken by Kevin Carter in Sudan, and awarded a Pulitzer Prize, it shows an emaciated child, alone and hunched over, with a vulture lurking in the background. The public response to the picture focused less on the child and her circumstances and more on the photographer and his actions, forcing the newspaper to issue an editorial statement making it clear that the child made it to a feeding centre and was unharmed by the vulture (Marinovich & Silva 2000). Nonetheless, the rancorous debate contributed to Carter's suicide, with his death memorialized in song (albeit one less poetic than Billie Holiday's ode to lynching).[8]

Carter's photograph of the Sudanese girl was an example of what David Perlmutter calls an "icon of outrage." One of the paradoxes of such images is that the outrage they foster "may stir controversy, accolades, and emotion, but *achieve* absolutely nothing ... the little girl in Carter's picture was not plucked

7. This assessment of the 1998 coverage comes from interviews I conducted with members of the Operation Lifeline Sudan and World Food Program media offices in Nairobi, July 2000.
8. Carter was one of four South African photojournalists whose often reckless personal and professional exploits while photographing atrocities earned them the name "the Bang-Bang club" (Marinovich & Silva 2000). The song, by the Manic Street Preachers (1996), includes the following lines: "Hi Time Magazine, Hi Pulitzer prize. Vulture stalked white piped lie forever. Wasted your life in black and white." For a discussion of the politics of famine photography, see Campbell (2003a).

away by some special Western relief effort, nor did intervention stem the causes of her suffering … Far from a metonym, the photograph should be taken as an anomaly precisely because the human disaster of the Sudan, then as now, is largely ignored by the Western media" (Perlmutter 1998, p. 28).

Although not wrong about the specifics of the Carter photograph, Perlmutter's conclusion is too sweeping when we consider other attempts to document the famine in Sudan. Tom Stoddart's 1998 series from the Sudan bears comparison with Sebastiao Salgado's Sahel photographs (Stoddart *et al.* 1998; Campbell 2003a). They represent a committed form of photojournalism that persists, even with the limited opportunities for publication, and which prompts considerable financial support for aid agencies. Because of this, such photographs refute the notion that the public instinctively turns away from, and is immobilized by, such pictures.

However, what is lost in many photojournalistic accounts of Sudan which confer a passive and pathetic victim-hood on the suffering—even the better ones such as Stoddart's series—is any sense of the way famine is integral to the wider conflict. As a result, the larger story of the crimes against humanity (of which the diversion and withholding of food resources is but one) perpetrated in Sudan goes almost unnoticed. As in the majority of conflicts, no one side in Sudan can claim the mantle of virtue. But what has been missed by the generic famine imagery is the way the Government of Sudan's (GoS) campaign of aerial bombardment against civilians in the south—notable for its random viciousness and its flagrant violation of the laws of war—creates the context for famine.

Using Russian supplied Antanov cargo planes, GoS forces have indiscriminately bombed hospitals, markets, schools and villages (Medecins sans Frontieres 2000a). In 2000, there were 152 bombing incidents recorded by fieldworkers, with 250 weapons dropped during 33 raids in July alone (US Committee for Refugees 2001; Sudan Working Group 2000). Because the Antanov is a cargo aircraft, which flies at a height (20,000 feet) sufficient to evade the few missiles possessed by the SPLA, it is a necessarily inaccurate platform from which to release weapons. Moreover, the devices dropped are crude: 25 gallon drums contain 20 pound bombs, packed into place with metal scraps that serve as shrapnel on detonation, function as crude cluster bombs. Significantly, there have also been substantiated reports of weapons containing chemicals being dropped from the Antanovs (Medecins sans Frontieres 2000a: section 4.2). Not surprisingly, these attacks cause large-scale death and destruction. One attack on the southern town of Yei in November 2000 killed 18 people in a market place (*BBC News* 2000a).

The strategy behind these war crimes is the desire on the part of the GoS to generally terrorize the civilian population. Bringing about large-scale displacement serves the purpose of keeping the people in a state of chronic insecurity, fosters deprivation, and ensures the SPLA does not have a secure communal base from which to operate more effectively. The bombings also wreak havoc upon aid operations in southern Sudan. In August 2000, for example, the World Food Programme accused the GoS of deliberately attacking its operations after

airstrips and United Nations and Red Cross aircraft (clearly marked with the ICRC flag) were bombed, causing relief work to be suspended (Medecins sans Frontieres 2000b; *BBC News* 2000). Notwithstanding progress in the negotiations for a comprehensive peace settlement in Sudan, the Khartoum Government's campaign against civilians is on-going (Human Rights Watch 2002; UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs 2002; International Crisis Group 2003).

Despite the potential newsworthiness of this story—which involves war crimes, military action, civilian deaths in a foreign land, and possibly chemical weapons—media coverage in the UK has been, to say the least, limited. An internet search of *The Guardian*'s archives for 2000, when there was widespread warfare against civilians, shows only two mentions of bombing in Sudan, both of them restricted to the "In Brief" section where single paragraphs from news agencies are located at the margins of the page (*The Guardian* 2000a, 2000b). No photo essay recorded the campaign against civilians. No report that set the bombings in their overall context or drew the disturbing conclusions about their inhumanity and illegality was evident; although two articles in *The Observer* that year did highlight the role oil plays in the Sudan conflict (Flint 2000a, 2000b).

What explanation can there be for this relative silence? There is no shortage of information. As the citations to this section establish, agencies such as MSF and the US Committee for Refugees have documented the GoS bombing campaigns and their effects. Nor is there a complete absence of official responses. Governments have been reluctant to denounce clearly the GoS policy, but occasional statements have provided possible hooks upon which news stories could be built (UN Department for Public Information 2000; US Department of State 2000; European Union 2000). Nor are pictures totally unavailable (US Committee for Refugees 2001).

Conclusion

The media's blindness towards the war crimes committed in Sudan demonstrates again the significance of context. In relationship to images, context involves three dimensions: the economy of indifference to others (especially others who are culturally, racially and spatially foreign), the economy of "taste and decency" whereby the media itself regulates the representation of death and atrocity, and the economy of display, wherein the meaning of images is produced by the intertextual relationship of captions, titles, surrounding arguments and sites for presentation.

Because of the interplay of these three contextual dimensions, Sudan does not regularly figure. 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. The absence of a war crimes narrative to employ 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 photographs conveying something other than the pathetic victims of famine, as though the crisis were a natural disaster, can only help to perpetuate the current crisis.

Above all else, the significance of social context for the creation of pictorial meaning has been the theme of this article. The same pictures can mean different things at different times because of different concerns. The lynching photographs of *Without Sanctuary* were produced as celebratory icons of white supremacy, but are now read as powerful evidence of a deplorable racist history. Similarly, the RUF photos of brutality in Sierra Leone serve as testament to the war crimes of a rebel army rather than the tribal barbarism of natives because of the circumstances surrounding their emergence. In each case, 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.

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 blindness produced by a combination of the social economy of taste and the media system of self-censorship constitutes a considerable injustice with regard to our collective understanding of the fate of the other.

Acknowledgements

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