

**Sandra Balsells**

# Is war just images?

I am worried by the level of opaqueness that clouds the world of images, especially that of war photography. Censorship, self-censorship, prohibitions, restrictions, manipulations, conformity, servility and passiveness, are all practices and attitudes increasingly frequent in the world of the media, a world saturated with images that paradoxically do not manage to reflect the complexity of what is happening around us.

I am outraged by the paternalism with which important sectors of the well-off societies criticise the diffusion of tough, hard-hitting images, hiding behind arguments halfway between cynical and hypocritical —such as not offending the sensibility of public opinion— but forgetting that reality, in war situations, is infinitely more horrifying than anything an image can show.

We can discuss what space this type of images should occupy —it is obvious that it is not the same to publish them on the front page of a newspaper as inside, just as it is not the same to show them in colour as in black and white— but I sincerely believe that questioning their diffusion is a symptom of a worrying moral weakness that prefers to close its eyes to the intolerable degree of injustice prevailing in the world.

In 1981, the American writer Susan Sontag stated in her book *On Photography*: “A society that imposes

as a rule the aspiration never to experience deprivation, failure, anguish, pain or panic and where death is seen not as something natural but as a cruel undeserved calamity, creates a tremendous curiosity about these events and photography partially satisfies this curiosity”. Today, 25 years later, I have the feeling that this curiosity has turned into rejection, discomfort. We prefer not to see because, in reality, we prefer not to know.

In her last book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Sontag went a bit further and said: “If a person is perennially surprised by the existence of depravation it means they have reached neither moral nor psychological maturity”. There can be no doubt that war represents one of the highest degrees of human wickedness. We ought, therefore, to rebel against this depravation and stop criticising the diffusion of images that show this harsh reality.

We too often make the mistake of believing that we know what war is because we know of its existence through images. We may believe that we understand it because we see images of the battlefields every day. But have we never thought that war may be—in fact it is—infinitely more brutal and pitiless than any photograph or television image can show? Probably not. We fall into the trap of believing that war is just images.

We should point out that the image, like any other language, is limited, restricted and only allows a small part of reality to be transmitted; a reality reinterpreted, subjective, fragmented, and by no means complete.

For example, in photographic images there is no sound or movement; in television or film images there are no smells. But, most importantly, missing also from any kind of image are the instants before and after those we see, the key moments for correctly understanding and interpreting the culminating instant or sequence that any image shows.

And we ought to add yet another limitation: the image is not just a fraction of time, but also of space. Any image is the result of a decision made by an informer who has opted to frame one scene and not another and it is obvious that framing means choosing a piece of reality and, therefore, excluding others from it.

These fractions of reality captured by the informer will later come up against new restrictions: those imposed by editors who—far from the field of battle—will decide what is suitable to show to their readers and what is not.

### The Acceptance of Censorship

If to the limitations typical of the photographic and audiovisual language we add habitual practices like censorship, we obtain as a result a really worrying degree of distorted reality. And this is unfortunately the scenario that we find these days.

We have to remember that photographic censorship is a practice that was imposed shortly after the birth of photography. The photograph quite soon became a powerful medium of propaganda and manipulation.

In 1855 the English photographer Roger Fenton, considered the first war reporter in history, was sent by the British government to the front during the Crimean War with the idea that, when he returned home, his images would manage to raise British morale and strengthen their commitment to that faraway conflict. As Gisèle Freund noted in her book *Photography and Society*, “Fenton’s expedition was financed on condition that he should never photograph the horrors of war in order not to upset the soldiers’ families”.

Fenton spent three months in the Crimea and returned to London with 360 glass plates from the war. Fenton’s images, censored from the start, give, in the words of Gisèle Freund, “a view of war as if it were a country outing”. His images, despite their great historical and documentary value, were restricted to giving a false idea of the war as they only show soldiers dug well in behind the line of fire. In these photographs there is no suffering, no wounds, no fear, no death.

It does not cease to be paradoxical that 150 years later, at the height of the Iraq war, the most powerful governments in the world continue to enforce similar

restrictions in order to give a distorted and censored view of war. I wonder, then, what progress we have made during this century and a half of war imagery.

Fortunately, there have been exceptions. At certain moments in history, photography has shown its enormous potential for stirring up the conscience of public opinion and mobilising society. Photographs like the one obtained by the Vietnamese photographer Nick Ut at Trang Bang (South Vietnam) on June 8<sup>th</sup> 1972, in which little Kim Phuc, a girl of nine, appears running naked, desperately, along a road after the Americans had bombed her town with napalm, contributed decisively to putting an end to that war. To a large extent, the power of the image overcame the destructive capability of the war machine. In this case the photograph showed its full potential to create remorse in American public opinion and contributed to turning the tide against the politicians responsible for it.

Precisely for this reason governments took note: from then on it was decided to limit the informers' freedom of movement and make access to the epicentre of wars difficult for them.

As Ignacio Ramonet points out in his book *La tiranía de la comunicación* (The Tyranny of Communication): "The turning point was, without a shadow of a doubt, the end of the Vietnam War. From that moment onwards, and not only in the United States, war images would be the subject of strict control.

Of some wars there are simply no pictures". And he gives a recent example: "From the beginning of the Gulf War" —he is referring to the one in 1991— "television viewers were highly dissatisfied with regard to the images of the war broadcast by the television

stations. A fundamental thing was missing: the war, paradoxically, had become invisible". Chechnya, the Congo and Sudan are other good examples of invisible conflicts.

With regard to this situation, the British journalist Robert Fisk advocates challenging authority. He said so quite clearly a few weeks ago when, talking about the case of the United States, he claimed: "The media in the USA doesn't need to be manipulated: the relationship between journalists and the government is a parasitic one. They feed off one another. Challenging the authorities, especially in time of war, would be seen as unpatriotic [...]. We must not let presidents, generals and journalists set the pattern of history. We should always defy authority".

Along the same lines, Ramonet introduces a new element: "In an overly mediatized universe, wars are also huge operations of political promotion, which could not go ahead outside the imperatives of public relations. Limpid images have to be produced that correspond to criteria of the advertising discourse". And this is a job too serious to leave in the hands of reporters.

### **Image Manipulation: the Sacrifice of Reality**

The photographer Edward Weston reminded us very often that, "only with effort can the camera be forced to lie". It is beyond question that the photograph or television image can fake reality —indeed, it does so very often— but it has to be made quite clear that this faking will depend on the fraudulent wishes of the reporter or the media and not on the nature of the camera. As Weston said, "the camera, basically, is an honest medium".

According to Ramonet, the politicians' concern about hiding the reality of war coincides with that of the people running the media and, more precisely, with that of the television bosses: "They increasingly mistrust reality, its dirty, difficult, savage side: they don't find it photogenic enough and seem convinced that what is authentic is difficult to film, that only what is false is aesthetic and lends itself well to being shown".

Just two years ago we experienced a case of manipulation that clearly shows this tendency and which marked an important turning point. It took place at the height of the commotion over the attacks of March 11<sup>th</sup> 2004 in Madrid. One of the most illustrative photos, and at the same time visually respectful, of that tragedy was the one by Pablo Torres Guerrero. It was a general shot of Atocha station full of terrified people lying on the rails next to one of the bombed trains. That desolate scene was on front pages of newspapers all over the world. However, hardly any of these newspapers showed the picture just as the photographer had taken it, but they reframed it, retouched it or, directly, manipulated it. Many editors thought Pablo Torres' original photograph would offend their readers. The "problem" with that image was the presence of human remains —probably a bit of leg— that appear in the bottom left of the photo, virtually imperceptible.

Many foreign newspapers, among them, some of the most prestigious in the world, considered those remains too unpleasant for their readers and opted to change them. The British newspaper *The Times*, for example, erased that piece of flesh with Photoshop and replaced it with some small stones like those on the tracks. For its part, *The International Herald Tribune*, using Photoshop, reduced

the size of the remains in order to make the scene more digestible. *The Guardian* changed its colour, turning the member that originally had a reddish hue grey. One of the people in charge of that newspaper declared that the change of colour "was by no means a perfect option", but it was the best solution.

Until then, in the world of journalism, it had been clear that if a reporter manipulated an image or forged a report this would mean their immediate dismissal and a black mark against their name. Since March 11<sup>th</sup>, certain papers have not only manipulated photographs intentionally, but, what is worse, they justify this manipulation.

This is the world we live in. When something offends or upsets us we just go ahead and alter it. In this infantilized and often dumbed down first world, where banal content prevails and where information is treated as a mere spectacle, what is uncomfortable is not the image, it is reality.

### When a False Deontological Code is Imposed

When all this is happening in our media, particularly outrageous is the analysis that certain institutions make, from time to time, of the photographic coverage of wars, hiding behind false deontological arguments.

I shall mention just one example. In May 2003, the Consell de la Informació de Catalunya (CIC) unanimously passed a declaration in which the written and television media were accused of serious deontological transgressions by the use of photographs that, according to this institution, were no more than a "mere exploitation of grief". I have chosen this example because I think that it reflects

quite well what much of our society stands for.

The CIC was referring to two photographs taken during the war in Iraq where children appeared. In one of the photographs we see a wounded girl in the arms of an adult, after a bombing raid had blown her feet off. In the other, little Ali, a 12-year-old boy, appears in hospital after losing his arms and suffering terrible burns over much of his body as a result of the impact of a missile.

Both photographs are terrible, that is beyond doubt, not for what they show but above all for what they will never be able to show: the after-effects that the war will leave forever on these two young victims; the loss of several family members in the case of the girl and virtually his entire family in the case of Ali; the destruction of their houses; the loss of their childhood. That really is terrible. Yet we shall probably never know.

From the sofa in our living room, far from the horror of the battlefield, we will close the newspaper or switch off the television and we will continue to say, outraged, that the diffusion of those photographs is just "the mere exploitation of grief". And we will go to bed as if nothing had happened, convinced that it would be better to silence these tragedies, tragedies that sometimes we ourselves help to cause or too often tolerate.

Therefore, hiding behind the "respect for the victims, their nearest and dearest, deontology and good taste", the CIC severely rebukes the publication of these two photos. Is it not paradoxical to appeal to good taste when we are talking of trying to show what is going on in a war, namely, an event that, by definition, is in repugnant taste?

But that's not all. This document adds:

"The horrors of war are well enough known and do not need to be dug up again now". Do the members of the Consell de la Informació de Catalunya really think that the horrors of war are well enough known? Known by whom? By them? By us, the TV viewers of the well-off societies of the first world? Fortunately, the great majority of people that saw those pictures and other similar ones have never suffered a war. Therefore, what do we know of the horror of war? It is obvious very little, if not virtually nothing. We know nothing of the physical pain caused by a bullet or a mine, nor of the traumas generated by mutilation with a knife, nor of forced deportations, nor of the fear of the sound of the bombs, nor of losing a father, a mother or a child while they queue for water or food.

It would take thousands of images, thousands of hair-raising screams and unbearable stench, to give us some idea of what it means to experience a war. Perhaps then we would begin to hate it and to rid the world of it.

As Susan Sontag said: "we have to allow the terrible images to follow us". Because it is obvious that the horrors of war are not familiar enough for those who have not experienced war. We can only get a small idea of the human cruelty that a war engenders through the images coming from those places. And what they eventually show, hard though it may be, will never be comparable to the suffering felt by the victims.

Unfortunately, though, our society has reached such a state of insensitivity towards the suffering of others that, in large measure, it has generated the degree of passiveness we are immersed in. Perhaps we have reached the point of

“emotional fatigue” that Jimmy Fox, the former graphic editor of the Magnum agency, often talks of. I think we have even gone a little further and have fallen into a pit of “emotional apathy” that is shameful. Virtually nothing moves us; if by chance we are upset, we choose to look the other way.

As Susan Sontag rightly says: “what determines the possibility of being

morally upset by photographs is the existence of an important political awareness. Without politics, the photographs of the slaughterhouse of history will merely be seen, in all probability, as unreal or as demoralising emotional blows”.

In the current context, what use is it to try to show if, in reality, we do not want to see? II

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**Horitzó (Horizon)**, Artur Heras (2004)  
ink and pencil on paper, 23 x 35 cm

