

Writing 2-14
2/4/18

Viewing Violence

Whether or not to show violent images has been at the forefront of debate in the media and art world, including everything from video games to the daily news. Currently, the mainstream media rarely shows images of violence, such as images from the Iraq war, because of intense push-back and censorship. However, when we don't see these photos, we also lose our empathy for the victims they depict. Photos are an especially powerful medium because they give us a window to a real event, forcing us suddenly to feel up close and personal with that event, even if we wish it weren't real. Some argue that violence has oversaturated our society so much that we are either desensitized to it or, in the case of school shootings, it inspires people to take similar action. Those who argue this perspective are advocating censorship because, in an age where photos are so easy to take and share, the only way to stop exposure to violent images is through censorship. Knowing this, some have become vocal about how we must learn to think about photos, as opposed to not viewing them at all. Rather than simply look away from these images, we should use the violence they show to greater effect: to end violence and suffering. The issue then is not whether or not we should show the images, but in what context and for what purpose.

Photos of violence can be used two ways: to justify violence, or to wipe it out. Ashraf Rushdy, a professor at Wesleyan University, has written extensively about racial violence in history, and explains in his essay "Exquisite Corpse" how an image can be used for justification or for justice. He notes that, in an earlier time, lynch mobs would publish photos of their

“handiwork” as justification for their actions, and as encouragement to others to take part in a score of horrific acts. “Circulated in newspapers, the pictures displayed the power of the white mob and the powerlessness of the black community... the image was certain to invite other communities to follow their example” (Rushdy 165). However, the justification and promotion of violence is not the only result that such published photos could have. If we fail to publish photos because we fear a spread of violence, we are not taking into account the use of context.



Close-up of lynch victim bares mute evidence of horrible slaying. Chicago undertaker A. A. Raynor said youth had not been castrated as was rumored. Mutilated face of victim was left unretouched by mortician at mother's request. She said she wanted "all the world" to witness the atrocity.

Take for example the photo of Emmett Till, a 14 year-old boy who was lynched after a white woman in a grocery store claimed he offended her. Note the key words “victim” and “atrocitiy” in the caption on this image, as opposed to the usual descriptions of lynch victims as “criminals,” and the lynching itself as “justice.” The photos typically taken by lynch mobs were not captioned mentioning the horrors that the mob inflicted in detail, or the age and innocence of the victim. Without this context, the photos became a justification for violence instead of a way

to empathize with the victims. The photo of Emmett Till, however, while still a photo of a lynch victim, became a powerful anti-violence image. Published in *Jet* magazine with the above caption, Rushdy notes how “His head swollen and bashed in, his mouth twisted and broken... left an indelible impression on young southern blacks” (Rushdy 166). This impression was not one of fear and powerlessness, and it did not encourage other southern communities to lynch people. Instead, the youth who saw this image responded “with horror that transformed itself into a promise to alter the political and racial terrain” (Rushdy 166). If this photo had never been published because of squeamish censorship, the horrific acts of the mob would not have been seen on such a wide scale and would not have inspired the young civil rights movement here in America.

The same level of violence that once inspired the civil rights movement now inspires the current gun debate. A recent article published by the *Washington Post* tells the story of Brishell Jones, a 16 year-old African American girl killed in a drive-by shooting on her way back from a friend's funeral. This story bears a remarkable resemblance to that of Emmett Till, as Brishell Jones' mother is currently fighting to confront the world with what gun violence looks like by showing a picture of her dead daughter. The significant difference is that the media today won't publish the photo. The *Washington Post* describes how powerful the photo is, and notes the fact that most photos published in the media show victims of gun violence when they were smiling and alive as opposed to revealing the results of the actual violence. These are empty words, as the article does not contain the photo itself, and the writer claims “I have seen the photo, and it's found easily online with a search of [Jones'] name” (Vargas). However, I followed the article's instructions only to get no results upon multiple searches. According to the reporter, they did not

publish the photo because “Here in the United States, what the media shows the public is given careful consideration guided by an ethical code to minimize harm” (Vargas). However, the harm done by not publishing these photos is much greater. While publishing the photo of Brishell Jones’ dead body may create some unhappy readers, the harm done by not publishing the photos falls on Brishell Jones, her mother, and the ongoing fight by activists all over the country against gun violence. These photos are powerful, just as the Washington Post says. They show politicians and people what the results of gun violence really look like.

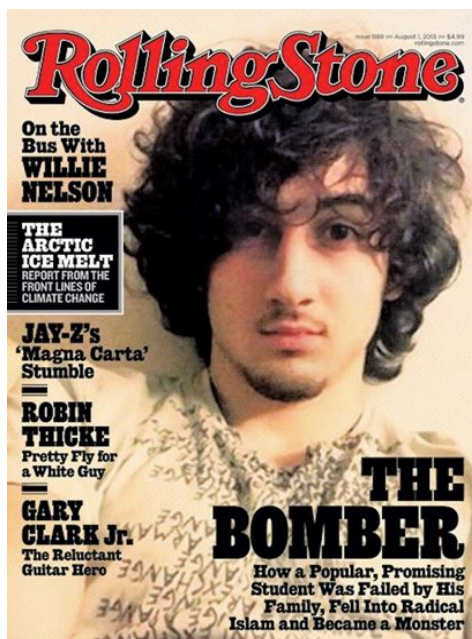
While the case of Emmett Till as inspiration for the young civil rights movement clearly demonstrates that violent photographs can be used to inspire justice for the victims and not simply more violence, some may still advocate for censorship believing that photos of violence may deliver a different message depending on the intentions of the photographer. One example might be photographs of concentration camps taken by Nazis. Susie Linfield, an associate professor of journalism who has written about violence in photography and photographic criticism, talks about this in an interview for *The New Yorker* with Ian Crouch. Linfield tells us that photography is an art form more concerned with morality than any other. She states throughout the interview that we should not shy away from the truth for fear of being confronted by difficult, sometimes shocking images. “Photographs often say things that their makers do not intend” and “reveal the cruelty of the perpetrators” (Linfield 53). The photographs of concentration camps taken by the Nazis intended to show the power and strength of the Third Reich, but they instead reveal their own madness. These photos have become powerful anti-Nazi images, and yet they were taken by the Nazis themselves. By not viewing these images, we would, in fact, be covering up the atrocities the Nazis committed.

A more recent example of photos taken by perpetrators of state-sanctioned violence revealing more than expected involves the US government and the photos of the treatment of prisoners from Iraq held in the Abu Ghraib prison.



When this photo was taken of a pile of tortured prisoners overseen by smiling guards, one giving a “thumbs up”, no doubt the guards were not horrified by their actions but instead felt they were doing something good. In the perpetrator’s mind, these photos were justifiable, much like the Nazis believed the photos of piles of bodies showed their strength. However, there is one critical difference between this photo and the photos taken by the Nazis. The Nazis originally took photos posing next to piles of bodies to show the world so that the world their power. The above photo was never meant to be shown to the world, it was taken on a guard’s cell phone, like a vacation photo for that person’s personal use and justification. When the photo was published, both the public and the photographer saw how ugly and unjust their actions were.

While providing context to images of violence is important, and the intentions of the photographer are critical, there is still another way in which the censorship of violence affects how we view the images of violent acts. We also have to examine the way we present images of the perpetrators. Often when a school shooting is reported, the media refrains from showing images of the actual violence and instead shows images of the shooter. These images often glorify the shooter and, in some ways, justify their actions by implying they were bullied or mistreated. This becomes encouragement for other young people to copy the shooters' crimes, as many admittedly do. Without censorship, the media would be compelled to show the atrocities committed and the pain these shooters have caused as opposed to the shooters themselves. When the shooters are depicted, the correct context would be to describe them as the bullies and murderers they are, not falsely victimized or glorified. The Boston bombing case is a perfect example of the media glorifying murderers as opposed to describing them as criminals and showing their violent acts.



This image of the Boston bomber on the cover of Rolling Stone magazine arguably makes him look like a rock star or a hero. When the bombing happened, many media outlets implied that Dzhokhar Tsarnaev had been pushed into radical Islam, just as it says on the cover of this magazine, as if Tsarnaev didn't really know what he was doing. If we really want to stop violence, we cannot glorify perpetrators as heroes and rock stars while turning away from images of the horror they have caused. Even if the media insists on publishing romanticised photos of perpetrators of violence, like Tsarnaev, if those images are placed next to an image of the harm they caused, it makes it far more difficult to see the perpetrator as sympathetic hero.

Despite these cases of media depictions of violence and its perpetrators, Teju Cole, Writer in Residence at Bard College and photography critic for the New York Times, still opposes the view that we should look at violence to end violence in his essay "Death in the Browser tab." He recounts his reaction to the Walter Scott video which was made available online. In the video in question, Scott, an unarmed black man, is shot by a white officer as Scott runs away. Cole argues that so many online videos of violence, from police brutality to acts of terrorism, have made us desensitized to violence and made viewing it too easy. He goes on to claim that death is always a private moment, regardless of political significance. On the public viewing of Scott's murder, Cole says, "It can turn private grief into a public spectacle... I recognized the political importance of the videos I had seen, but it had also felt like an intrusion when I watched them." (Cole 37) Cole is telling us not to intrude on these "personal moments". However, the alternative is to simply ignore them. We should not shame ourselves for having such easy access to viewing of public and political violence. The political charge of videos such as Walter Scott's is the reason this violence must be seen. To bring justice to the communities affected by police

brutality is political, now given a name and a person to relate to in Walter Scott, and yet Cole would have us turn away because we are intruding or putting politics first. Photos of violence, no matter how political, are not putting politics center stage when viewed correctly. They bring us closer to the political injustice and inspire more empathy toward the victim. Using the photo of Emmett Till from Jet magazine as an example, if we say that we cannot intrude on a person's private grief, we would simply be ignoring a violent act. This would not have sat well with the mother of Emmett Till, who wanted this injustice to be shown. Despite all arguments to the contrary, there is truly no argument that supersedes the desire of the victims of violence themselves. The images of what they endured are part of their story, and no one should have the right to censor that.

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