Abstract:

This paper focuses on the role of atrocity photography as a human rights advocacy tool. It offers a thorough analysis of the promises and perils from photography’s abilities to bear witness to atrocities, to represent victims, and to call for action. The paper acknowledges photography as a strong advocacy tool, but it also reminds that it can be difficult to use a two-dimensional medium to convey information about a multi-dimensional reality. The paper also points to ways to overcome some of the most pertinent challenges from using photography as an advocacy tool.
# Table of Contents

1. **INTRODUCTION** ........................................................................................................ 3  

2. **ATROCITY PHOTOGRAPHY AS TOOL FOR HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCACY** .......... 4  
   2.1. **PHOTOGRAPHY TO BEAR WITNESS** ........................................................................ 5  
       2.1.1. *THE OBJECTIVE CAMERA* .................................................................................. 6  
       2.1.2. *PHOTOGRAPHY AS A PERFORMATIVE ACT* ..................................................... 7  
   2.2. **PHOTOGRAPHY AS REPRESENTATION** ................................................................. 12  
       2.2.1. *GIVING VOICE THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHY* ....................................................... 13  
       2.2.2 *WHEN REPRESENTATION HARDENS INTO STEREOTYPES* .................................. 15  
   2.3. **PHOTOGRAPHY AND ACTION** .............................................................................. 18  
       2.3.1. *PHOTOGRAPHY AND ACTION* .......................................................................... 19  
       2.3.2. *PHOTOGRAPHY AND INACTION* ....................................................................... 20  

3. **ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES** ........................................................................... 23  
   3.1. **AVOID DISTORTING REALITY** ............................................................................... 23  
       3.1.1. *HAVE CLEAR ETHICAL GUIDELINES* ................................................................... 23  
       3.1.2. *USE SEVERAL SOURCES AND ANGLES* ............................................................ 23  
   3.2. **AVOID STEREOTYPING** ......................................................................................... 24  
       3.2.1. *FOCUS ON CONTEXT* ......................................................................................... 24  
       3.2.2. *USE CITIZENS JOURNALISM* ............................................................................. 24  
   3.3. **AVOID ANAESTHETIZATION** .................................................................................. 25  
       3.3.1. *ENGAGE VIEWERS* ............................................................................................. 25  
       3.3.2. *LOOKING BEYOND BEAUTY* ............................................................................. 26  

4. **CONCLUSION** ............................................................................................................. 26  

BIBLIOGRAPHY .................................................................................................................. 28
1. Introduction

Ever since the camera was invented in 1839, photography has kept company with death and atrocities, and human rights advocates have embraced photography as a way to raise awareness about their causes and as a tool to call for action. A picture is worth a thousand words, it has often been claimed, and indeed photography can be a powerful tool, as photography has a unique ability to compress a large amount of information into a single frame. This can be helpful when the aim is to convey a strong message, and photography of gross human rights violations, i.e. atrocity photography, has become an important advocacy tool for human rights advocates.

However, photography is not innocent, as Jay Prosser has put it\(^1\). Photography can be misused and photography can be biased in a way that distorts reality. Or as Tom Junod puts it: “Photographs lie. Even great photographs. Especially great photographs”\(^2\). This calls for a thorough examination of the role of atrocity photography as an advocacy tool, which is the purpose of this paper. The paper will be guided by the following research question:

“What are the promises and perils of relying on atrocity photography as a human rights advocacy tool, and how can the main challenges be overcome?”

The analysis will be focused on three different aspects of photography as an advocacy tool: photography’s ability to bear witness, photography as a representation tool and photography as a way to call for action to stop atrocities.

---


Each of these aspects will be scrutinized, which will help identify the promises and perils from using atrocity photography as an advocacy tool. Following the analysis, the paper will also point to ways that might help overcome some of the identified challenges.

The purpose of this paper is by no means to dismiss the use of atrocity photography as an important advocacy tool. Quite the reverse, the assumption of the paper is that such photography can be a very powerful tool. Rather, the purpose of the paper is to point to some of the challenges that are associated with the use of photography as an advocacy tool for human rights, so that these challenges can be acknowledged and taken into consideration in human rights advocacy.

2. Atrocity photography as tool for human rights advocacy

Photography has the distinctive ability to capture one specific moment in time and freeze it. This freezing of time can tie the past (which is portrayed in the picture) together with the present (when then picture is viewed) in a way that stretches into the future (as the photograph will continue to exist and will be viewed in the future).

This trans-temporal ability makes photography a powerful tool, and it is a tool that is well suited for ongoing advocacy campaigns that try to inform about the past to change current behavior in order to create a better future. This is why photography has become an important tool for human rights advocates.

Human rights advocates use atrocity photography in many different ways but three aspects are recurring; First, photography is often used as a means to
bear witness and document atrocities. Second, photography is used as a means to represent individuals or groups who have had their rights violated, and third, photography is used to call for action to stop atrocities. In the following, each of these three aspects will be analyzed, looking both at the promises and perils of the different aspects.

2.1. Photography to bear witness

“Photographs have the kind of authority over imagination today, which the printed word had yesterday, and the spoken work before that. They seem utterly real.”

- Walter Lippmann 1922

Although dated in 1922, the citation above very well captures the power of photojournalism. The camera lens is often intended to act as a third eye for the public, who get a chance to observe a situation or moment without actually being at the scene. Some have called photojournalists for ‘a neutral eye’, or for ‘someone who stands outside the event’ to depict and convey information about reality. This implies that photography has come to be regarded as a tool for gathering empirical evidence that can document reality.

While this might be desirable to help document atrocities, it also raises important questions. If photographs are to be understood as journalistic accounts that try to depict reality, then it must be trusted that the person behind the camera lens does not manipulate with this reality. These two perspectives on photography's role will be discussed in the following section.

---

4 Ibid. Pp. 8
2.1.1. The objective camera

Photography can be a proof that something actually took place, and such proof can be particularly important in relation to documenting atrocities. Atrocities can be so heinous that they become unbelievable, and therefore issues of proof almost always accompany the articulation of atrocities. In the lack of any concrete proofs, deniers of the atrocities can more easily convince people and policy makers that the atrocities in fact never took place. Attempts to deny the Holocaust and the Armenian genocide are clear examples of this.

Photographs of atrocities can be a very strong argument and evidence if the truth is challenged by such denial, and photography has indeed proven to be an important tool to refute the claims of Holocaust deniers and deniers of the Armenian genocide.

"The camera is the eye of history"\(^5\), someone once has said, and in many ways this is true; photography can be evidence of what has taken place in the past. Also, photography can help make sure that victims of atrocities are not forgotten or neglected. Also, photography can be used as an important tool to report and inform about ongoing atrocities, which can help mobilize for action to help victims. This aspect will be discussed in more detail in section 2.3.

‘Seeing is believing’, it has often been said, and photography has therefore played – and continues to play – an important role. From this perspective, photography is understood as a constative medium, i.e. a medium of descriptive nature, which primarily expresses statements about events, facts or feelings that have occurred\(^6\). In contrast to this, others have argued that photography can in

---


fact be a performative medium, meaning that it enacts the things it portrays\(^7\) and thus directly influences on what happens. If this is so, it clearly challenges the idea of the objectivity of the camera, and this perspective will be discussed below.

### 2.1.2. Photography as a performative act

It is a challenge for photographers that it is only possible to capture a small, defined part of a scene with a camera lens. This forces the photographer to consider where to point the camera, and the photographer singlehandedly chooses what to include – and exclude – in a frame. Also, the photographer chooses which perspective to shoot a picture from, and she also determines whom to put in focus. Such decisions are important for the way the viewers of the photographs will perceive the image and the photographer can therefore not be viewed as a completely neutral communicator of events.

To illustrate the power of framing, take a look at picture 1 and 2 below, which portray the same scene of Palestinian stone throwers from two different angles.

**Picture 1\(^8\)**

---

\(^7\) Ibid. Pp. 52

Clearly, these two photographs evoke different emotions. The first picture seems to tell a story of a young, angry rebel throwing stones. He seems powerful and determined and the fire in the background illustrates a sense of rage and it gives the impression that the photograph is taken in a zone of conflict.

The second picture illustrates the same boy, but portrayed from a different angle, which includes some of the activity that takes place around him. In this picture, the boy does not seem powerful, as he is not put center stage. Rather, it seems that he is a young man enjoying the attention from a number of photographers who are all pointing their cameras at him. The scene also seems much more peaceful as the crowd of photographers stand calmly in the street, looking more like photographers in a zoo than photographers in a zone of conflict.

Thus, the perspective of the camera clearly makes a difference for how photographs are perceived, which emphasizes the makes them performative acts rather than merely constative acts.
There is an additional aspect that also suggests that photography is essentially of a performative nature; the role of the photographer as creator of events. To consider this aspect, think again of picture 1 and 2 above. It is easy to imagine that the boy on the pictures might actually have been affected by the fact that he was surrounded by all of these photographers. Photographer and anthropologist Ruben Salvadori, who is the photographer of the second photo above, calls photography “a show in which the photographer is an actor and plays a role”\textsuperscript{10}. In an interview, he explains how this role has an effect on the scene: “If you point a tiny camera at someone, what does he do? Most likely he is going to smile or something. Now imagine that a group of photographers shows up with helmets, gas masks, at least two cameras each, and they come there to take pictures of what you do. You are not going to sit rolling fingers”\textsuperscript{11}. More than just framing the picture, the photographer might thus actually have an influence on what takes place, which clearly also makes photography a performative act.

The fact that photojournalists often work on behalf of media agencies that often ask for specific types of pictures increases the risk that photographers will try to over-dramatize a scene. According to professor Barbie Zelizer photographers do this by relying on stereotypes that “flatten out details in favor of something that shocks and draws attention”\textsuperscript{12}. Salvadori also emphasizes this as he describes the creation of the first photograph: “This photo is an example of what the media market requires from us; There is smoke, fire, the challenging stance, angry look towards a potential enemy. This is what we have to create if we

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{12} Kattago, Siobhan (2012). ”Memory and Representation in Contemporary Europe: The Persistence of the Past.” Ashgate Publishing. Pp.. 49
want to sell. This pushes many photojournalists to seek and create this drama even when the situation lacks of it.”

In the same vein, there have been numerous examples of photographers staging their pictures to capture a preconceived image, and according to writer and photographer Susan Sontag “many of the canonical images of early war photography turn out to have been staged, or to have had their subjects tampered with”.

When considering the performative nature of photography, it is also important to consider the role of post-editing. A picture can be photoshopped into a completely different picture, and the potential manipulation with reality thus only starts with the actual shooting of the picture and continues with the photo editing.

One illustrative examples of the role of post-editing is included below. The first image is a photograph of a German soldier shooting at a Jewish woman with a child in her arms near Ukraine doing Second World War. This photograph is stark in its simplicity and cultural analyst Griselda Pollock points out that “the triangular posture of the militarized masculine figure with his phallic and deadly prosthesis contrasts with the vulnerable huddle of a dying woman clasping her child.”

---

13 Ibid.
This picture was magnified into a fifteen-foot version and was part of an exhibition on holocaust history at the Yad Washem in Israel. However, the picture above was in fact a cropped version of the original picture, which can be seen here below.

In this original picture the emphasis on the connection between the woman and the soldier is less strong, as the picture includes more people to the right of the woman, and there are also indications of two additional soldiers whose guns are peeping into the picture to the left. From this original picture, it is not clear if the soldier is in fact pointing his gun directly at the woman with the child. The

\footnote{Ibid. Pp. 64}
\footnote{Ibid. Pp. 70}
photograph bears witness to the atrocity, and there is no doubt that it indeed took place. However, the post-editing of the image makes the message of the photograph a bit more simplistic than the original scene. The post-editing illustrates a displacement of what can be called ‘the true atrocity’ to a more simplistic and composed version of the atrocity that delivers a more unequivocal and powerful message.

2.2. Photography as representation

“Images of individuals produced by documentary photography represent neither simple individuals nor complex abstractions. Rather, these somantic images embody a specific way of being human.”

- Hariman and Lucaites, 2007

When a photograph is taken it freezes a single moment in time and immortalizes the event, condition and/or people that is being portrayed. This immortalizing feature of photography is one of its powerful qualities, and this feature is especially strong when dealing with atrocity photography. A photograph can document human rights violations, and such one photograph is often used to represent a broader range of atrocities that are taking place. Thus, atrocity photography is not only documentation of the specific atrocity portrayed in the photograph, but a representation of a broad range of other atrocities that have not been captured by a lens.

Such representations are important as they can give voice to those represented – both to the individuals physically portrayed and to the wider

---

groups that are victims of the atrocities. However, there is a risk that the representations harden into stereotypes, whereby individual voices are reduced to echoes of previous voices. These different perspectives on representation will be discussed here below.

2.2.1. Giving voice through photography

From a democratic point of view, one of the virtues of journalism and photojournalism is to act as mouthpiece for civil society. While fulfilling this task, it is important that not only those who are willing to shout get heard, but that voice is also given to the voiceless, i.e. those without the capabilities to raise their voice or those who fear to do so.

When photojournalists publish atrocity photographs, it is often meant as an act of given voice to those being portrayed. The images bear witness of the atrocities that the portrayed people have been victim of, and the act of bearing witness constitutes a specific form of collective remembering that interprets an event as significant and deserving of critical attention\(^{19}\). In this way the victims’ suffering is acknowledged as important, and the images stand as a cry for justice and help, and the photographs thus give the portrayed people a way to speak up.

As mentioned above, photographs are often intended not only to give voice to the people physically portrayed, but to broader groups. This is a difficult task, as this requires that the photographs are constructed in a way that somewhat can capture this broader context. One way that photographers sometimes aim to capture this broader context is by producing pictures that somehow appeal to a collective memory.

\(^{19}\) Zelizer, Barbie (1998), "Remembering to Forget: Holocaust memory through the camera’s eye." The University of Chicago Press. Pp. 10
One way to do this is by taking pictures that draw parallels to photographs with iconic power. That a picture has ‘iconic power’ implies that the photograph - or the certain type of photographs - has “symbolic overtones and larger frames of reference that endow it with national or worldwide significance”\(^{20}\). Iconic photographs thus “concentrate the hopes and fears of millions and provide an instant and effortless connection to some deeply meaningful moment in history”\(^{21}\).

According to photography critic Vicki Goldberg some photographs can “somewhat magically turn into iconic representations that stand for a system of belief, a theme, an epoch”\(^{22}\). As we often remember an atrocity by its image, such images become a wheel of remembrance.

One example of iconic photography is the use of photographs of amputees in Sierra Leone during the civil war, which took place from 1991-2002. Horrifying photographs of victims who had had body parts amputated became a symbol of the suffering and cruelty that characterized this gruesome war.

Picture 5\(^{23}\):


\(^{22}\) Ibid.

Pictures with such iconic functions can be very powerful and they can be used as a means to evoke emotions tied to the collective memory that the viewers are part of. Using iconic photography can allow the photographer to compress information into a picture, as the use of the icon will add connotations established by earlier photographs. In this way, the immediate identification of visual signs in a photograph is followed by recognition of conventional meanings attributed to these signs24, and the photograph thus contains much more information than what is immediately observable.

This can be very useful for photojournalists covering atrocities, especially if the photojournalists are asked to deliver only a few pictures to illustrate a given crisis, which is often the case. However, there are also drawbacks from this approach as the use of iconic photography risks reducing the portrayed people from individuals to ciphers or, worse, stereotypes.

2.2.2 When representation hardens into stereotypes

While photography can give agency to those being represented, it is important to be aware that photography’s power to represent can quickly harden into stereotypes. A stereotype can be defined as “something preconceived or oversimplified that is constantly repeated without change”25.

Such stereotyping can have various damaging consequences. Among others, stereotypes can over-simplify conflicts, it can render the portrayed people powerless, and it risks re-victimizing victims.

As to the first of these challenges, photography has a build-in challenge of neglecting nuances and becoming over-simplistic. Cameras can only capture a fraction of what the eye can capture, and this two-dimensionality of photography makes it difficult to convey information about a multi-dimensional reality.

According to professor David Campbell this challenge becomes particularly prominent if the lens is directed towards a single individual, which is often the case in the humanist tradition of photojournalism, where photographers often rely on somatic images to signify social issues. While this approach has often been praised as a way to give voice to the individuals (as discussed above), it is important to remember that the portrayed individuals represent an “individuated aggregate”, which means that although appearing in a photograph as a singular person, the person in fact metonymically depicts a collective experience by reducing a general construct (the structures of atrocity) to a specific embodiment (the person portrayed). The use of such somatic pictures thus face the challenge that they have to be personal enough to represent the individual truthfully, while also being impersonal enough so that details of the individual do not derail a larger generalization.

Susan Sontag is concerned with photography’s ability to represent one story of the past as the only story. The problem is not that people remember through photographs, she argues, but that they remember only the photographs. This places a big responsibility on the shoulders of photojournalists, who have the power to shape people’s perceptions of conflicts.

---

26 Ibid. Pp. 87
If conflicts are only represented through stereotypical images of suffering individuals, the photographers risk immortalizing the portrayed individuals as eternal victims without context. Such portrayal induces a sense of pity among viewers rather than inducing discussions about the broader picture of social, political and cultural structures that might be the actual sources of the conflict.

The second challenge from relying on stereotypes is that it undermines the efforts to give voice to the people portrayed. According to Campbell, there is a void of agency and history with victims arrayed passively before a lens so that their suffering can be appropriated. A victim might agree to have his picture taken, because he wants to have his voice heard, but in fact it is the photographer who is in control of the photograph. It is not the victim who gets to write the caption for the picture, nor does he get to edit it or decide who gets to publish it. The victim is therefore dependent on the photographer to actually speak on his behalf. With voice can come a sense of power; the lack of control over representation can mark a return to powerlessness. This notion of powerlessness is closely connected to the third challenge from reiterating stereotypes, which is that the use of stereotypes risks re-victimizing victims.

Photographers often intend to produce images that appeal emotionally to viewers, so that the image can be a bridge of connection between those portrayed and those who view. However, Campbell points out that rather than establishing a bond between the viewers and the victims, stereotypical images of people in distress generate a relationship structured by notions of self/other.

---

us/them, superior/inferior, civilized/barbaric and so on\textsuperscript{32}. When images cover conflicts in developing countries Campbell furthermore suggests that such imagery is invested with colonial relations of power\textsuperscript{33}, where victims are portrayed as helpless individuals awaiting external assistance. Such one-dimensional portrayal risks re-victimizing victims by portraying them as eternal victims, who will never be able to take care of themselves.

Not only do such images risk re-victimizing the individuals portrayed, the images might be taken as representatives for peoples, thus re-victimizing entire peoples. This can be particularly damaging if a people or country wants to move on after a conflict. The immortalization of photography can be damaging if a people is mostly interested in forgetting. Rather than encouraging forgetfulness, images can in such instances invite too much remembering.

\subsection*{2.3. Photography and action}

\textit{“After the eye of God pursuing Cain all the way onto the tomb, we now have the eye of Humanity skimming over the oceans and continents in search of criminals”}\textsuperscript{34}

- Virilio, 1995

Pictures of atrocities can reach a global audience in a matter of hours via digital platforms. This makes us all bystanders to atrocities and whether we like it or not, we are engaged in the events that we are confronted with. The circulation of images of distant events has created a sort of virtual community between


\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.

viewers and victims, and some claim that this has spurred a sense of ‘shared humanity’\textsuperscript{35}.

In the citation of Virilio above, Virilio talks about “the eye of Humanity”. This eye of humanity has evolved concurrently with the development of new media outlets and digital platforms that has made global tele-surveillance possible. According to Virilio, this global tele-surveillance has led to the realization of the “truly panoptical vision”, where no human rights violator will be able to hide, and where all atrocities will therefore be visible to the world, which will lead to more efficient ways to stop atrocities\textsuperscript{36}.

However, this presumes that there is a natural link between knowledge and action. Some claim that there is no such natural link, and that too much knowledge might in fact have the complete opposite effect and anaesthetize viewers rather than mobilize them for action. These two different perspectives on photography and action will be discussed below.

2.3.1. Photography and action

A single photograph may have done more to halt the Vietnam War than all the writings of moral philosophers of the time put together, argues professor Sharon Sliwinski\textsuperscript{37}. Thereby, she argues that there indeed is a connection between the dissemination of atrocity photography and actions to stop such atrocities. Many others share this view, and the notion that representations of human suffering

\begin{thebibliography}{10}
\bibitem{frisch} Frisch, Andrea (2004). "The Invention of the Eyewitness". Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Department of Romance Languages
\end{thebibliography}
contain a kind of inexplicable ability to influence on action is by now a common maxim\textsuperscript{38}.

This alleged causal relation between publicity and political action has even gained its own name - “the CNN effect”, and some claim that this is a crucial factor for mobilizing political will to take action\textsuperscript{39}. The underlying assumption behind the CNN effect is that watching an atrocity induces a sense of responsibility, and the watchers then carry a demand for action to the world’s leaders, who in in turn must decide carefully what actions to take\textsuperscript{40}. Optimists therefore see the digital age as a milestone for democracy, as it has become ever more easy and fast to disseminate photographs that can call for action. Some have even claimed that our world has turned into ‘a global village’, where we have all become more interconnected, which has “heightening human awareness of responsibility to an intense degree”\textsuperscript{41}.

In this way public opinion is assumed to be able to muster a political will to act, e.g. through a humanitarian intervention. Susan Sontag uses the protests of the Vietnam War and the public outcry for action during the war in Bosnia as examples of how public opinion has helped shape political actions to stop atrocities\textsuperscript{42}.

\textbf{2.3.2. Photography and inaction} \\

Interestingly, Bosnia has also been used to illustrate the limitations of the CNN-effect. According to Thomas Keenan, Bosnia is a good example of how knowledge
of atrocities does not seem to mobilize the public to form a joint voice and call for action. Rather than being optimistic about the CNN-effect, he, and others, expresses a concern that “the camera and the watching cripples our responses; that images sap the will”\textsuperscript{43}. Scholars have pointed to at least three factors as explanations for this inaction; compassion fatigue, voyeurism, and the anaesthetizing effects of beautification.

“The price of eternal vigilance is indifference”\textsuperscript{44}, Marshall McLuhan once said, thus pointing to a seemingly paradox of the digital age; Despite the fact that we now have the tools to monitor human rights violations on a global scale, these very same tools seem to have made us immune to the atrocities that we see. In the words of Susan Sontag, “we have become callous, and in the end, such images just make us a little less able to feel, to have our conscience pricked”\textsuperscript{45}.

This tendency to become ‘immune’ to atrocity photography has been termed ‘compassion fatigue’. According to professor Fred Ritchen such compassion fatigue should not be mistaken for viewers’ lack of interest or lack of compassion. Rather, it should be understood in the light of media’s repetitive obsession with shock and superficiality, which fails to engage viewers in serious conversation\textsuperscript{46}. Susan Sontag supports this position and explains that compassion is an unstable emotion that will whither if it is not translated into action\textsuperscript{47}. Thus, people do not become inured because of the quantity of pictures they are exposed to, but because they are not engaged in any way.

Some have criticized that atrocity photography turns human misery into an object of consumption. Atrocity photography can be intriguing, and Walter Benjamin charges that atrocity photography has in fact turned into an object of enjoyment\(^\text{48}\). In the same vein, Sliwinski suggests that atrocity photography might even invoke voyeurism as much as indignation\(^\text{49}\). Such voyeurism can be accompanied by a sense of unconscious guilt that can make the viewer want to forget about the pictures, thus not making the viewer call for action.

This is in line with the third aspect that suggests that atrocity photography will not lead to action to stop atrocities, which has to do with the alchemistic nature of photography. Photography can beautify the objects it portrays, which is often the very aim of photography, as people are more likely to pay attention to beautifully composed pictures with beautiful colors etc.

However, this beautification has been criticized, as some claim that it becomes an obstacle in order to muster support for interventions to stop atrocities: “Beautification of tragedy results in pictures that ultimately reinforce our passivity toward the experience they reveal. To aestheticize tragedy is the fastest way to anaesthetize the feelings of those who are witnessing it. Beauty is a call to admiration, not to action.”\(^\text{50}\)

---

\(^{50}\) David Levi Strauss, “The Documentary Debate: Aesthetic or Anaesthetic?,” in \textit{Between the Eyes} (New York: Aperture, 2003), 3
3. Addressing the challenges

Indeed photography can be used as an advocacy tool, but the analyses above have pointed to some important things to consider when relying on atrocity photography as such an advocacy tool. The lessons learned from the analyses along with some brief recommendations on how to avoid the identified perils are presented below.

3.1. Avoid distorting reality

Although photography might appear as neutral and objective, this is not necessarily so. If photography has the intent to ‘bear witness’, it implies a responsibility to stay as truthful to reality as possible. ‘Reality’ is, however, an ambiguous term, but there are some essential steps that can be taken to avoid intentionally distorting reality.

3.1.1. Have clear ethical guidelines

Having clear ethical guidelines for photographers and editors is one important way to reduce the risk of manipulating with images in a way that distort reality. Such guidelines are not supposed to forbid post-processing or force photographers to shoot in a particular way, but the guidelines should remind photojournalists that they, when shooting pictures that are supposed to raise awareness, have a duty to capture images that can illustrate reality as nuanced and truthful as possible.

3.1.2. Use several sources and angles

In order to ensure that a situation is covered as nuanced and truthfully as possible, it might also be a good idea to use various sources and cover a story
from different angles. This will induce a more thorough understanding of a particular conflict.

3.2. Avoid stereotyping

Human rights advocates often have to speak on behalf of others. Some have described the advocates’ role as that of a messenger or “a humble porter of other people's voices”\(^{51}\), but in fact human rights advocates often reduce information to an extent that reduces the people portrayed to stereotypes. There are at least two things that can be done to reduce this risk of producing such hard stereotypes.

3.2.1. Focus on context

It is important to move beyond images of individualized suffering to include context in atrocity photography. This is naturally a challenge, as it can be difficult to portray a historical or social context. This makes Campbell conclude that “the ultimate challenge for photography as a technology of visualization is to find compelling ways of narrating a story in a way that the political, social and historical context can be portrayed in a timely manner”\(^{52}\).

3.2.2. Use citizens journalism

There is no denying that most current atrocity photography focus on atrocities in the Global South, and that those covering the conflicts are mostly photojournalists and reporters from the Global North. This poses a risk that the photojournalists are reproducing stereotyped perceptions of conflict, and one way to reduce this would be to actively try to support and use local reporting.


With the explosion of access to communication tools such as cell phones – also in the Global South – there has also been an explosion in what has been termed ‘citizen journalism’. Human rights advocates could become better at integrating such perspectives in their advocacy work to reduce the risk of a Western bias in the way people and conflicts are portrayed.

3.3. Avoid anaesthetization

Some claim that people become desensitized or anesthetized from being confronted with massive amounts of atrocity photography. In a world where technology is constantly making it easier to take and share pictures, this risk of anaesthetization might have increased. There are a couple of things that can be done to reduce this risk.

3.3.1. Engage viewers

Watching is an inherently passive action, and according to Sontag, this is one of the main challenges in order to reduce the risk of compassion fatigue. Engaging viewers in dialogue and calling upon them to take action might be a way to overcome this compassion fatigue.

Human rights advocates should thus try to think of ways to engage viewers and develop platforms for such dialogue as well as use the already existing platforms to their fullest. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram and Flickr, to mention a few, could serve as a starting point for facilitating such dialogue, and human rights advocates need to stay in the forefront of digital social media to ensure public engagement.
3.3.2. Looking beyond beauty

To avoid that beautification of atrocity gets an anaesthetizing effect, it is important that photographs look beyond the beauty of a picture. Atrocity can indeed be aesthetically appealing if the colors or composition of a picture is beautiful, but atrocity photography should have a deeper significance than just being pretty, as the purpose is to convey important information about a human rights violation. This once again calls for a greater emphasis on integrating context into atrocity photography.

4. Conclusion

Atrocity photography has potential to be a strong advocacy tool for human rights advocates, as photographs can be a way to bear witness to atrocities, represent those who get their human rights violated, and call for action to stop the atrocities. However, there are some challenges that must be addresses to make sure that the potential of atrocity photography is realized.

First, it is important that photography’s authenticity is not taken for granted; rather it has to be carefully scrutinized to make sure that it does not distort the reality that it is supposed to depict. In order to reduce the risk of distorting reality, human rights advocates should consider developing ethical guidelines for production of photography as well as using multiple sources that cover conflicts from various angles.

Second, it is important that the representations that are used to convey information about atrocities do not turn into stereotypes that lose sight of the larger historical and social context. To reduce this risk, human rights advocates
should encourage photographers to focus on depicting context, and also, human rights advocates might consider increasing use of local photojournalists or ‘citizen journalists’ from the Global South.

And finally, it is important that it is not taken for granted that pictures of atrocity will necessarily facilitate action to stop the atrocities. In order to reduce the risk of compassion fatigue, human rights advocates should encourage photographers to produce images that convey information about context. Also, human rights advocates should try to engage the viewers of atrocity photography by facilitating dialogue so that the act of watching does not become sedative. In other words, a picture will only be worth a thousand words, if it makes those watching the picture say or think the thousand words.
Bibliography


- Zelizer, Barbie (1998), Remembering to Forget: Holocaust memory through the camera’s eye. The University of Chicago Press.