PHOTOJOURNALISM AND HUMAN RIGHTS

The Calamity of the Kodak

"There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism," Walter Benjamin famously wrote. When it comes to photography, the opposite is also true. Every image of barbarism—of immiseration, humiliation, terror, extermination—embraces its opposite, though sometimes unknowingly. Every image of suffering says not only, "This is so," but also, by implication: "This must not be"; not only, "This goes on," but also, by implication: "This must stop." Documents of suffering are documents of protest: they show us what happens when we unmake the world.

That is the dialectic, and the hope, at the heart of the photograph of suffering. But lodged within that dialectic and that hope is a complicating, devastating paradox. There is no doubt—pace Brecht, Sontag, and Sekula—that photography has, more than any other twentieth-century medium, exposed violence—made violence visible—to millions of people all over the globe. Yet the history of photography also shows just how limited and inadequate such exposure is: seeing does not necessarily translate into believing, caring, or acting. That is the dialectic, and the failure, at the heart of the photograph of suffering.

What, then, is photography's role in revealing injustice, fighting exploitation, and furthering human rights? Photojournalists have been key creators and disseminators of what the historian Samuel Moyn called "the spectacle of blood . . . fastened on extravagant bodily violation and pain." What, if anything, is there to show for this century-long spectacle of grim
images? And why is there, especially in the present moment, such a backlash against these photographs?

A half century before the invention of the camera, the American revolutionists declared the "unalienable" right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; the French soon followed by proclaiming the "natural" rights of man and the citizen—rights defined, in the words that still inspire, as "liberty, property, security and resistance to oppression." In the nineteenth century, Marx—who, as John Berger observed, "came of age [in] the year of the camera's invention"—conceived of a worldwide proletariat that transcended national borders. But it is only in the late twentieth century that the consciousness, if not the reality, of something called "universal human rights" takes hold. It is in our era that a new claim is made, a claim that would have sounded strange if not absurd for most of human history. The claim is this: every person—even the pauper, the nonwhite, the stranger, the female, the child, the stateless refugee—is entitled to dignity, safety, and freedom.

Yet when the idea of human rights reemerged in the second half of the twentieth century, it was precisely because the vision articulated two hundred years before had not been made real. We know of human rights because we live in a world in which they do not exist for most of the people on earth; as the historian Lynn Hunt wrote, "We are most certain that a human right is at issue when we feel horrified by its violation." Especially since the Holocaust, suffering rather than idealism has been the incubator of human rights: their epiphany is negative.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, approved by the fledgling United Nations in 1948, reflects this failure and this negativity: it was born not in the early, optimistic years of the twentieth century, and certainly not as a direct, unobstructed descendent of the French and American Revolutions, but in the aftermath of the destruction of the Jewish people and scores of millions of others. It was born, that is, amidst the rubble of a stunned world that had descended into a violence so inexplicably depraved that it was forced to consider what, if anything, makes human beings human. The terrible irony is that, as the millions of corpses were being counted and the displaced-persons camps swelled, the now-disgraced idea of the human was the only authority to which one could appeal: nature, god, and history had become irrelevant at best. Thus, Hannah Arendt wrote in 1951, "Man of the twentieth century has become just as emancipated from nature as eighteenth-century man was from history. History and nature have become equally alien to us ... Humanity ... has today become an inescapable fact." In 1951, as today, this inescapable fact was not a hopeful one: modern man, Arendt wrote, "has shown us potentialities that were neither recognized nor even suspected by Western philosophy and religion."

The modern human-rights movement, then, grew not out of pride at what we accomplished in the twentieth century but out of shame, indeed terror, at what we destroyed. The Holocaust taught us things about ourselves we did not want to know yet could not afford to ignore. "Human rights is not so much the declaration of the superiority of European civilization as a warning by Europeans that the rest of the world should not seek to reproduce its mistakes," rights theorist Michael Ignatieff has written. "The Universal Declaration set out to reestablish the idea of human rights at the precise historical moment in which they had been shown to have had no foundation whatever in natural human attributes."

In this light, the idea of human rights represents our attempt to conquer our natures, or at least our histories, in the hope of creating a more bearable future; in this light, the human-rights movement seeks to create something new and artificial rather than return to something old and authentic. The establishment of human rights is a project—a life-and-death project—to build a kind of "species solidarity" that is deeper and stronger than culture, nation, religion, race, class, gender, or politics.

Does such a project make any sense? Is it grounded in anything stronger than wishful thinking? The philosopher Richard Rorty pointed out that, for most people throughout most of history, the idea of universal brotherhood has been thought of as ludicrous (if it was thought of at all). "Most people are simply unable to understand why membership in a biological species is supposed to suffice for membership in a moral community," Rorty wrote. "This is not because they are insufficiently rational. It is, typically, because they live in a world in which it would be just too risky—indeed, would often be insanely dangerous—to let one's sense of
moral community stretch beyond one's family, clan, or tribe." Theodor Adorno believed that an obliviousness to the distress of strangers—he called it "coldness"—was a key part of our human DNA, and a deadly one: "The inability to identify with others was unquestionably the most important psychological condition for the fact that something like Auschwitz could have occurred."

Rorty articulated something equally important but less frequently acknowledged: the baffled revulsion with which members of industrialized, post-Enlightenment societies regard those who fail to recognize human rights is matched by their equally baffled revulsion for us:

It is of no use whatever to say, with Kant: Notice that what you have in common, your humanity, is more important than these trivial differences. For the people we are trying to convince will join them that they notice nothing of the sort. Such people are morally offended by the suggestion that they should treat someone who is not kin as if he were a brother, or a nigger as if he were white, or a queer as if he were normal, or an infidel as if she were a believer. They are offended by the suggestion that they treat people whom they do not think of as human as if they were human.

In this view, the obstruction to solidarity, and at least to tolerance and care, is not a dearth of reason but of concerned identification; and if this is so, rational arguments will not do much to further human rights.

It was Arendt who saw the fatal paradoxes at the heart of the concept of human rights more acutely than anyone before or since. She argued that the Holocaust, and the years leading up to it, had shown the irredeemable failure of human-rights doctrines. The millions of illegal, unwanted refugees and exiles who roamed through Europe between the world wars were not recognized as fellow humans—not recognized as deserving of life—by the "civilized" countries to which they fled. "The incredible plight of an ever-growing group of innocent people was like a practical demonstration of the totalitarian movements' cynical claims that no such thing as inalienable human rights existed," she wrote. "The very phrase 'human rights' became for all concerned—victims, persecutors, and onlookers alike—the evidence of hopeless idealism or fumbling feeble-minded hypocrisy."

Indeed, the flood of unwanted exiles revealed the ugly secret at the heart of human-rights doctrines: the only person who makes an appeal—who must make an appeal—to something as vague and weak as human rights is the person who has been stripped of everything and is, therefore, no longer recognizably human. Home, land, family, profession, nation: everything that distinguishes the human from the animal had been stolen from the refugees; what, then, was left? These homeless, stateless people embodied the degraded reality of the abandoned pariah rather than the noble ideal of the rights-bearing person whom the French revolutionists had envisioned. "Once they had left their homeland they remained homeless, once they had left their state they became stateless; once they had been deprived of their human rights they were rightless, the scum of the earth," Arendt wrote. And where could one find this scum? In the internment camp, the refugee camp, the ghetto, and, finally, the concentration camp: these were the only places that welcomed the unwanted. (I have always thought of Auschwitz as a kind of demented international.) Again, the negative epiphany: "It seems that a man who is nothing but a man has lost the very qualities which make it possible for other people to treat him as a fellow-man." For Arendt, it is concrete politics embedded in the nation-state, not abstract morality or humanitarian sentiment, that make rights real and protect the holders of them; rights are a political accomplishment rather than a natural attribute.

The philosophies that undergird ideas about human rights are, then, built around absence. And photographs, I would argue, are the perfect medium to mirror the lacunae at the heart of human-rights ideals. It is awfully hard to photograph a human right: what in the world would it look like? In fact, rights don't look like anything at all. What, then, does a person with human rights look like? Well, like a person: that's it. But what photographers can do, and do peculiarly well, is to show how those without such rights look, and what the absence of such rights does to a person. And they can, and have, shown us what people struggling for rights look like, in victory and defeat.

Starting in the late nineteenth century, photojournalists began to document these absences, these defeats, and these victories. Some document...
tary photographers, like Jacob Riis, depicted a poverty so debased and all-encompassing that it reduced its victims to an animal-like existence. Others have shown us people fighting for political power: Robert Capa and David Seymour (Chim) in the Paris of the Popular Front, mixing with the socialists and the strikers; Josef Koudelka in Prague, witnessing the socialist spring that turned into the bitterest of Stalinist winters; Danny Lyon in the American South, documenting the stoic dignity of the early civil rights activists; Peter Magubane in apartheid South Africa, recording the revolt of the desperate yet jubilant students of Soweto.

They have shown us what whole countries look like in war: Capa, Gerda Taro, and Chim in Spain as it fought for the Republic; Marc Garanger in Algeria as it resisted the French; Philip Jones Griffiths in Vietnam as it battled the Americans. They have shown us the shattering grief of war, as in Don McCullin's searing visual dispatches from Cyprus, Congo, Northern Ireland, and Lebanon. They have shown us nations as they cease to exist: James Nachtwey in Chechnya, Ron Haviv in Bosnia. They have shown us countries in the midst of multiple wars: Ashley Gilbertson, João Silva, and Tyler Hicks in Iraq, photographing everything from burly young American soldiers interrogating terrified civilians to the anguish wrought by the suicide bombers. They have shown us what political madness looks like, as in Li Zhensheng's newspaper photographs of China's Cultural Revolution and Abbas's documentation of the Iranian revolution as it moved from revolt to tyranny. They have shown us mass death, as in Gilles Peress's disjunctive pictures from Rwanda; and the struggle to resist it, as in Sebastião Salgado's sorrow-drenched images from the mammade famines of the Sahel. And increasingly, they show us the no-less-political violence that results from the most intimate relationships. Look, for instance, at Ulrik Jantzen's photographs of Bangladeshi women—screaming, bleeding, blackened, scarred—who have been burnt with acid by their angry "suitors" as punishment for refusing marriage or by their husbands for requesting a divorce; or at the charred girls and women of Afghanistan, for whom suicide-by-fire is the only escape from forced marriages.

Photojournalists have shown us a world unfit for habitation. They have enlarged our conception of what human beings do to each other, though often in ways that grieve, surprise, frighten, and disgust us. In doing so, photographers have forced us to envision what a better world, or at least a less-bad world, would be; but they also suggest how hard it is to create one.

Why are photographs so good at making us see cruelty? Partly, I think, because photographs bring home to us the reality of physical suffering with a literalness and an irrefutability that neither literature nor painting can claim. "Hunger looks like the man that hunger is killing," wrote the Uruguayan essayist Eduardo Galeano as he looked at a photograph by Sebastião Salgado. The very thing that critics have assailed photographs for not doing—explaining causation, process, relationships—is connected to the very thing they do so well: present us, to ourselves and each other, as bodily creatures. Photographs reveal how the human body is "the original site of reality," in Elaine Scarry's words. "What is remembered in the body is well remembered." The body is our primary truth, our inescapable fate.

Which is precisely what Jean Améry learned, to his never-ending amazement, when he faced his Gestapo torturers: all those attributes that a man might think of as "his soul, or his mind, or his consciousness, or his identity, are destroyed when there is that cracking and splintering in the shoulder joints." Torture—and then Auschwitz—taught Améry, a proud intellectual, just how real his body was (and how equally useless his ideas turned out to be, or so he claimed). Photographs show us how easily we are reduced to the merely physical, which is to say how easily the body can be maimed, starved, splintered, beaten, burnt, torn, and crushed. Photographs present us, in short, with physical cruelty and our vulnerability to it. The vulnerability is something that every human being shares; the cruelty is something that shatters our very sense of what it means to be human. "The violation of the human body... has a visceral, irrational, and irrevocable quality about it," Kanan Makiya wrote. "It is the bedrock under all the layers of horrible things that human beings do to one another."

The photograph of suffering presents us, too, with the specific, individual experience of suffering. Victims of human-rights abuses are members of larger groups who are exploited, oppressed, even exterminated. But each experiences her pain and her death, as do we all, through the prism of her unique self. The indictment of the photograph as vague and abstract, made by writers like Kracauer and Sontag, can go only so far. The opposite
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is more often true: the photograph singles out the individual from the mass and confronts us with the particularity, and the terrible loneliness, of suffering. (This insistence on the individual's worth is itself an affirmation of human rights.) And though it is true that we often do not know the names or life stories of those we see in a photograph, the same can be said of a portrait by Rembrandt or by Lucian Freud. The best photographic portraits, like the best painted portraits, present us not with biographical information but with a soul.

As we saw in chapter 1, documentary photography's ability to confront us with powerful images of suffering—images that we do not, cannot, always understand or master—has been the subject of sometimes vitirol attacks from a range of critics. Particularly in the post-World War II period, photographs depicting violence and poverty, especially in the so-called third world, have been denounced as patronizing, imperialist, and racist. "The image of the subaltern conjures up an almost neocolonial ideology of failure, inadequacy, passivity, fatalism, and inevitability," anthropologists Arthur Kleinman and Joan Kleinman charged, writing of the photograph of a starving Sudanese child; many others have echoed such claims.

In particular, the charge of pornography is freely bandied about when it comes to photographs of suffering. This can be traced, in part, to a 1978 essay on documentary photography in which Allan Sekula derided what he called "the pornography of the 'direct' representation of misery." Fredric Jameson's blanket dictum against looking reiterated this antipathy: "The visual is essentially pornographic, which is to say that it has its end in rapt, mindless fascination." Sontag, in her last book, restated this truism: "All images that display the violation of an attractive body are, to a certain degree, pornographic." Countless others critics and would-be critics have adopted this terminology; indeed, "pornographic photography" has become a stock phrase with numerous iterations. Thus, war photography is casually dismissed as "war porn," while in the humanitarian-aid world, photographs of the poor and vulnerable are decried as "development pornography." Jorgen Lissner, a Danish humanitarian-aid worker, summed up this outlook when he charged that the photograph of an African famine victim is a kind of "social pornography" because "it exposes something in human life that is as delicate and deeply personal as sexuality, that is, suffering."

The use of this term is not totally inapt, but it belies an essential confusion. Pornography strikes many viewers as a betrayal, not an expression, of human sexuality: pornography reveals something that strangers should not see and whose worth is diminished when they do. But photographs of suffering people—of the body in pain—are something quite different: they are the revelation of something that ought not exist. One can make the argument that sex should remain private; when it comes to torture, exploitation, and cruelty, however, privacy is an integral part of the problem.

Other confusions in the pornography argument abound. Not all pornography is "bad"—that is, exploitative, degrading, or violent—which is why its use as an epithet makes little sense. Nor is it obvious that a child starving to death is deeply personal and private—or, rather, only deeply personal and private—in the sense that making love usually is; on the contrary, famine is a shared, social condition, as are many other kinds of misery and grief. (War, we might say, is the collectivization of anguish.) Why is the teller, rather than the tale, considered obscene—and in any case, aren't some of the world's obscenities worthy of our attention?

Indeed, the term "pornographic" is now so widely and variously—dare I say promiscuously?—summoned in discussions of documentary photography that it is not at all clear what it is meant to address or how it can lead to deeper understandings. It is used to describe a suspiciously wide variety of contradictory responses: too little concern for suffering and a narcissistic identification with it; inappropriate numbing and inappropriate excitement; lazy carelessness about the pain of others and a creepy preoccupation with it. "Pornography seems to be an infinitely plastic term whose concentration of rhetorical force and explanatory power is such that its meaning is not really held to account," the historian Carolyn J. Dean has written. "The widespread use of the term 'pornography' seems elegantly to account for the exhaustion of empathy, and yet turns out not to explain anything at all. ... It 'explains' without explaining the shattering of the body's dignity." Rather than illuminate an actual phenomenon, the term "pornography," like the term "orientalism," is used as a weapon.

Pornography = mindless fascination = applied to many images of suffering
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whose main job is to shame the accused and to silence free discussion. Indeed, the obsessive way in which pornography is invoked, and the whiff of prurience that surrounds it, remind me of the Nazi condemnation of modern art as “degenerate.”

Ironically, those photographers who have worked hardest and most consciously to avoid objectifying their subjects are fiercely derided as pornographers and exploiters: James Nachtwey, whose work is discussed in chapter 8, is a prime target of such attacks. So is Sebastião Salgado, the Brazilian photographer who often lives for long periods with the subjects of his photographs. A Marxist economist before he became a photojournalist, Salgado has spent decades documenting the third world’s peasants, manual workers, refugees, famine victims, and displaced people: the “losers in globalization’s great game,” as David Rieff put it. Some of Salgado’s subjects are famished or live in refugee camps; some work on stony farms and jungle plantations, on ships and railroads, in factories, on oil rigs, in diamond and coal mines. They carry machetes in their hands, heavy sacks on their heads, wizened babies in their arms. Their bodies are often bent, twisted, or strained; “backbreaking” does not seem a metaphor here. Most of them are unimaginably poor.

Yet these people, Salgado’s pictures insist, are as central to the epics of our time as are the power brokers in Washington or the masters of Wall Street. Salgado imbues his subjects with an unflagging respect that borders on reverence: these people may be losers, but he praises them like famous men. His velvety black-and-white images are painstakingly composed, dramatically theatrical, painterly in their use of light, gigantic, and eerily beautiful. But the beauty is often fearsome: his subjects are drenched in sweat, dirt, or mud; dressed in rags; starving, homeless, exhausted; overwhelmed by nature in her angriest modes.

Some leftwing writers, such as Galeano and the Portuguese Communist José Saramago, admire Salgado and like to write about him. Such admirers often live abroad. In this country his press is less favorable, and his photographs have been attacked as “sentimental voyeurism,” “offensive,” “embarrassing,” “kitsch,” “self-aggrandizing,” “meretricious,” and even “insulting.” In the pages of the New Yorker, critic Ingrid Sischy, who would go on to edit a celebrity magazine, dripped with scorn: “Salgado is far too busy with the compositional aspects of his pictures—with finding the ‘grace’ and ‘beauty’ in the twisted forms of his anguished subjects. . . . This is photography that runs on a kind of emotional blackmail fuelled by a drama of art direction.”

It is true that Salgado’s photographs can veer into a kind of nostalgic romanticism that recalls the era of socialist-realism. His monumental scale can seem grandiose, and the chiaroscuro lighting he likes can appear arty. His self-consciously religious references can seem, well, self-conscious. But it is also true that Salgado has documented the workers of the world with more perception, care, and sheer interest than any photographer I can think of: he has visualized the labor theory of value. And personalized it too: the unapologetic, forthright people in his portraits command our attention as equals, not “subalterns.” Yet disparaging Salgado is now the sine qua non of intellectual sophistication—especially, surprisingly, from the (American) left. Susan Sontag accused Salgado’s portraits of being “complicit . . . in the cult of celebrity,” a charge that I find baffling at best. The critic Luc Sante went further, writing that Salgado’s pictures brim with a “vacuous universality . . . of misery” that leads to political passivity, and added: “For a photographer to perpetrate that kind of murderous indolence is unforgivable.” What remains unexplained is how Salgado’s murderous indolence has led him to work in some of the world’s most ravaged places with Doctors Without Borders and Amnesty International, and to march with the militant, landless peasants of Brazil, whose cause he has long championed. And it cannot explain how or why Salgado’s subjects trust him, as they must for him to take such intimate pictures.

Unlike Gilles Peress, Salgado is not a philosophic or aesthetic radical: he does not make us question how we see or how we know, and his photographs can be criticized on this and other grounds. But the exaggerated vitriol his pictures (and he) inspire demonstrates something else: a fierce animus against the very possibility that beauty—which is to say dignity, tenderness, and grace—can thrive amongst the poor. This fear of finding beauty in all the wrong places is closely aligned with the careless charge of pornography. Both are forms of sanctimony; both are deeply puritanical.
Both stem from a need to impose a diet of “shoulds” and “should nots” on
our reactions to images, and from a fear of the unpredictable, complicating
things we might find if we look too freely and too openly at the world.

This fear, and this puritanism, have resulted in the championing of an
insultingly slummy aesthetic: craft, care, structure, and visual power—
everything Salgad embodies—are now morally suspect in photojournalism,
while sloppiness denotes authenticity and a good heart. The writer
Jim Lewis echoed Sischy when he proclaimed in Slate: “I really don’t think
that a picture of an atrocity should be a good picture, a beautiful picture, a
well-composed picture... It should be casually composed, hastily framed,
only competently printed.” It is as if we, the relatively safe and relatively
well-off, can atone for our good fortune only by delving into the visual
equivalent of sackcloth and ashes: if a picture seems sloppy, it’s okay to
look. But this is the aesthetic not of commitment but of guilt, tinged with
a peculiar narcissism. It confuses moral weight with aesthetic clumsiness,
and it is more concerned with the clear conscience of the viewer than with
the plight of the injured subject.

This, then, is the catch-22 into which photojournalists are thrust to­
day. Some are criticized for taking too-beautiful pictures, while others are
chided for images that are too ugly to bear; some are criticized for a gruesome
reality, while others are accused of being overly romantic in their
approach. Viewers, too, are at fault: critics have told audiences that our
reactions are too harsh or too delicate; needlessly complex, or laughably
simple; gushing with sentiment, or devoid of feeling. We are voyeurs, or
we are uncaring, or perhaps we are uncarving voyeurs.

The problem is not that some of these charges are unfair; on the con­
trary, all of them are sometimes true. The problem is that making, and
looking at, pictures that portray suffering will always be a highly imperfect
and highly impure activity. Adorno captured this paradox—this no-exit—
in which all art, and all representation, finds itself when it attempts to
show the unshowable or speak the unspeakable. Writing of Schoenberg’s
1946 cantata A Survivor from Warsaw, he observed:

The victims are turned into works of art, tossed out to be gobbled up by the world
that did them in. The so-called artistic rendering of the naked physical pain of
those who were beaten down with rifle butts contains, however distantly, the possi­
bility that pleasure can be squeezed from it... The unthinkable... becomes
transfigured, something of its horror removed. By this alone an injustice is done
the victims, yet no art that avoided the victims could stand up to the demands of
justice. Even the sound of desperation pays tribute to a heinous affirmation.

Rather than confront this difficulty, which may in fact be impossible to
resolve, contemporary critics dismiss problematic images as pornographic
and launch ad hominem attacks against photojournalists. These critics
seek something that does not exist: an uncorrupted, unblemished pho­
tographic gaze that will result in images flawlessly poised between hope
and despair, resistance and defeat, intimacy and distance. They demand
photographs that embody an absolute reciprocity between photographer
and subject, though absolute reciprocity is a hard thing to find even in the
best of circumstances. They want the worst things on earth—the most
agonizing, unjust things on earth—to be represented in ways that are not
incomplete, imperfect, or discomfiting. Is there an unproblematic way to
show the degradation of a person? Is there an untroubling way to portray
the death of a nation? Is there an inoffensive way to document unforgiv­
able violence? Is there a right way to look at any of this? Ultimately, pious
denouncements of the "pornographic" photographs reveal something that
is, I think, fairly simple: a desire to not look at the world’s cruellest
moments and to remain, therefore, unsullied.

It is a contemporary truism, indeed a contemporary cliché, that photo­
graphs of suffering desensitize us: the plethora of awful images has, ap­
parently, taken the sting out of horror. Sontag’s warning in On Photogra­
phy that photographs deaden conscience has been echoed many times;
indeed, to dispute this idea is akin to repudiating evolution or joining the
flat-earth society. Barbie Zelizer, in her classic study of Holocaust pho­
tographs, echoed Sontag: “Photography may function most directly to
achieve what it ought to have stifled—atrocity’s normalization... The
act of making people see is beginning to take the place of making people
do.” Countless other critics have made this point, often blaming pho­
tojournalism for the creation of so-called compassion fatigue. Even some
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photographers agree: Alfredo Jaar, an admirably self-reflective conceptual artist who frequently uses photographs, has decried the "bombardment of images . . . that has completely anesthetized us."

Yet this claim remains entirely unproved—and lacks basic logic. It implies that a golden age existed in which people throughout the world responded with empathy, generosity, and saving action when confronted with the suffering of others. But when, I wonder, did this utopia exist? The early twentieth century? The nineteenth century, the eighteenth, or perhaps the twelfth or ninth? Where and when can we find it—and the good Samaritans who presumably used to populate our globe?

In fact, the desensitization argument is exactly wrong. For most of history most people have known little, and cared less, about the suffering of those who are unknown or alien. "The feeling of humanity evaporates and grows feeble in embracing all mankind," Rousseau observed. "It is proper that our humanity should confine itself to our fellow citizens." In Rousseau's time, it was the family, clan, tribe, ethnic group, religious community, or nation that mattered most. In our time, that is still true. The only difference is that today, in a few parts of the world, those outside one's immediate circle of concern sometimes matter too; for a very small minority, the conviction that we are morally and practically connected to the suffering of others is the pillar of political and moral identity.

And it is the camera—the still camera, the film camera, the video camera, and now the digital camera—that has done so much to globalize our consciences; it is the camera that brought us the twentieth century's bad news. Today it is, quite simply, impossible to say, "I did not know": photographs have robbed us of the alibi of ignorance. We know of suffering in far-flung parts of the world in ways that our forebears never could, and the images we see—in some places, under some conditions—demand not just our interest but our response. Far from dulling our senses, photography has been a key component in the creation of what rights theorist Mary Kaldor has called "our growing consciousness of what it means to be human." Try to imagine, if only for a moment, what your intellectual, political, and ethical world would be like if you had never seen a photograph.

Sentiment—that bugaboo, again, of Brecht and Sontag—has been central in making this visual encounter with strangers matter. For it is the opportunity, and the ability, to be moved by the plight of others—to understand that they hurt too, and to feel responsible to that understanding—that has made a great difference in the creation of a human-rights consciousness. When Rorty poses the question, "Why should I care about . . . a person whose habits I find disgusting?" he suggests that the best answer might be: "Because her mother would grieve for her." The camera has been a key tool—perhaps the key tool—in enabling such empathic leaps.

Not that photographs stop atrocities, much less prevent them: our innocence on that front ended long ago. The belief in the saving power of exposure qua exposure can no longer be sustained. Journalist Martha's Gellhorn's disillusion—journalism's "guiding light," she would learn in the 1930s, was "no stronger than a glow-worm"—is widely shared by contemporary journalists, documentary photographers, humanitarian-aid workers, and human-rights activists. Despite more-than-adequate information, for instance, no country was willing to stop the carnage in Rwanda, nor will they do so in Darfur. And yet photography has been central to fostering the idea, if not yet the reality, that barbarous assaults are no longer the private property of the states that commit them. It is impossible to imagine transnational groups such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, or Doctors Without Borders in the pre-photographic age.

The internationalism of our time is, admittedly, peculiar. Its focus is not the exploited worker organizing a revolution or the colonial subject fighting for self-determination but, rather, the victim of torture, imprisonment, starvation, or extermination in need of outside help. This subject, for good or ill, could come into being—did come into being—only in tandem with the mass dissemination of photographic images. "What happens in the jails of Kigali, Kabul, Beijing, and Johannesburg has become the business of television viewers across the world," Michael Ignatieff has observed. The image's morality, he adds, "is the morality of the war correspondent, . . . who learns in the end to pay attention only to the victims." This may not be the morality, or the internationalism, that socialists, communists, and anarchists dreamed of for almost two hundred years; it places far more emphasis on the actions of bystanders than on those of the op-
pressed, and it dangerously conflates political crises with humanitarian ones. But it is the morality, and the internationalism, that we have.

The intimate connection between an international human-rights consciousness and the photograph is especially evident when we look at one of the earliest humanitarian movements: the Anglo-American campaign, founded in the late nineteenth century, to stop King Leopold’s crimes in his personal colony, the Congo. Those crimes included slave labor, whippings, tortures, rapes, amputations, and executions; historians have estimated that up to ten million Congolese died from overwork, starvation, exposure, disease, or outright murder in the years 1880–1920. No surprise, then, that it was in the Congo reform movement that the phrase “crimes against humanity” was used for what may have been the first time.

As rights theorist Sharon Sliwinski and historian Adam Hochschild have written, presenting what we now call “atrocity photographs” was a key part of the movement’s strategy. Some of the images appeared in Western newspapers; but often, and most dramatically, they were projected as slides in magic-lantern shows at jam-packed lectures and protest meetings in America, England, and throughout Europe. (In the same period, Jacob Riis was using lantern shows to expose tenement poverty in New York City.) The photographs were shocking, indeed literally outrageous, to Victorian audiences and—pace Sontag and Jaar—they are still devastating; the desecrated bodies we have seen from Warsaw and Lodz, Cambodia and Bosnia, Sudan and Sierra Leone have not lessened their power. On the contrary: we look at the Congo pictures in full knowledge of the atrocities that would follow, which makes them more rather than less terrible to behold. Unlike audiences of a century ago, we know that the Congo was an early part of an ongoing story rather than its final chapter. Pictures of these atrocities do not look anachronistic: in fact, they seem sadly modern.

One Congo photograph shows two boys of indeterminate age. Their skin is coal-black, their hair cropped short. One youth—who, the contemporaneous caption tells us, is named Mola—sits on a curved wooden chair; his hairless chest is bare, while a white cloth drapes over his abdo-

men and genitals; the other boy, named Yoka, stands next to him in a white tunic and long white skirt. Each is barefoot. And each, we see clearly, has had his right hand chopped or beaten off just below his wrist (Mola’s left hand is mutilated too); the black stumps, which rest delicately against the ice-white clothes, assault us. Mola and Yoka stare directly at the camera: Mola’s brow is slightly furrowed, as if in suppressed fury; Yoka looks blank and stunned.

Another photograph shows a man named Nsala sitting on the ground. His arm wraps around his knee; he is barefoot, almost naked; he stares at something before him, something clumpy and indistinct. The caption tells us what: Nsala is looking, we learn, at the hand and foot of his five-year-old daughter, who had been mutilated, murdered, and eaten by African representatives of the Anglo-Belgian India Rubber Company. Nsala’s wife, too, had been killed and eaten in the attack on their village, which was punished for failing to meet its rubber quota.

The Congo reform movement’s ability to force its audiences to visualize Leopold’s cruelty—to see a man staring at the discarded flesh of what used to be his daughter—was a new and powerful tool. No doubt those audiences were in some ways condescending and smug, even racist and imperialist. Their fellow-feeling, like ours, was far from perfect. But they were also genuinely saddened, angered, and, most of all, moved to action: the photographs they saw inspired pity and sentimentality, but not only that. In fact, these photographs created a connective tissue of concern that transcended geography, culture, and race.

Mark Twain, in his darkly hilarious 1905 satire King Leopold’s Soliloquy, recognized as much. Twain’s mad king of the Congo rails against the “sore calamity” of “the kodak,” which has challenged his power in unprecedented ways. Previously, Leopold recalls fondly, tales of atrocities could be refuted as “slander” spread by “busy-body American missionaries and exasperated foreigners . . . Yes, all things went harmoniously and pleasantly in those good days.” But the camera, alas, changed all that: “Then all of a sudden came the crash! That is to say, the incorruptible kodak—and all harmony went to hell!” The camera, Leopold sadly realizes, is “the only witness . . . I couldn’t bribe . . . Ten thousand pulpits and ten thousand
presses are saying the good word for me all the time. . . Then that trivial little kodak, that a child can carry in its pocket, gets up, uttering never a word, and knocks them dumb!"

Still, the camera isn't powerful in itself and it cannot substitute for human will—which is why the king ends on an upbeat note. He knows, he says, that "we do not wish to look" and that most people will "shudder and turn away" from the evidence of his crimes. Leopold has faith in the durability of moral apathy, and who can say he is foolish to do so? "That is my protection," the king crows. "I know the human race."

The ability of photographs to conjure deep emotion is one of their great strengths. But this power—precisely because it is divorced from narrative, political context, and analysis—is equally a danger. Ironically, the more searing an image—the more easily and quickly it provokes our innate, unreflective sense that "This is wrong!"—the more misleading it can be.

Consider, for instance, Don McCullin's infamous photographs of grotesquely emaciated children taken during the Nigerian-Biafran war of 1967-70. The Biafran children, often shown naked and holding pathetic tin pots, are awful to behold: distorted, distended, deformed, with legs like sticks, bellies like balloons, and eyes like deep, dead pools. Such photographs caused worldwide revulsion and anger, and the war became an international cause célèbre. It was the Biafran war that led to a rethinking of humanitarian aid and inspired the founding of Doctors Without Borders in 1971.

But though photographs can do much to expose a crisis, they can do little to explain it—and sometimes they lead viewers astray. Rony Brauman, a founder of Doctors Without Borders and its president from 1982 to 1994, has charged that the Biafran movement's leader, Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, was a major contributor to the suffering of his people. Ojukwu, Brauman explains, "had declared himself prepared to see all the Biafrans perish" rather than relinquish his political aims, and had refused the delivery of desperately needed aid donations. The unlucky Biafrans, in other words, who had made a conscious decision to allow them to die, but it was only the dying, not the reasons behind it, that McCullin's pictures could show. Think, too, of another widely photographed event: the one million Hutus who poured into Goma, Zaire, after the Rwandan genocide. It is true that they were living in filthy conditions and suffering from cholera. But it is also true that many were mass rapists and murderers: something the photographs of them could not reveal, and that those who sent money to the humanitarian-aid organizations either didn't or didn't want to, know.

This does not mean that the images of Biafran children starving or of diseased Rwandan refugees are lies. On the contrary: the suffering such photographs depict cannot, and should not, be denied. But it does mean that we, the viewers, must look outside the frame to understand the complex realities out of which these photographs grew. Like human rights themselves, this expansive kind of vision is not particularly natural but, rather, is something we must consciously create.

There is a kind of photograph that the early, optimistic practitioners of photojournalism could not have imagined, though perhaps King Leopold could: photographs that celebrate cruelty rather than condemn it.

Such pictures have an unfortunately long history. In the United States, thousands of photographs of lynchings were taken, mainly though not solely in the years 1870–1940. They show black men—bludgeoned, swol­len, burnt, castrated—as they sway, necks broken, on twisted ropes hung from trees. Even worse, these photographs often show crowds of whites—ordinary people with their children, sometimes dressed in their Sunday best—as they smile, laugh, and cheer at the mutilated corpses.

The lynching photographs belong to a large and ignoble genre of pictures taken by perpetrators throughout the world to document and exult in their power. The Nazis and their supporters took millions of photographs; in the following chapter I explore some of these images and the moral implications of looking at them. And though the Nazis were unusually diligent self-recorders of sadism, they were hardly unique. Saddam Hussein's Baathists documented some of their tortures, rapes, and executions in photographs and films. Members of Sierra Leone's Revolutionary United Front photographed themselves, rather astonishingly, in the act of committing atrocities and murders. The Liberian warlord Prince Johnson filmed his underlings as they tortured his rival, President Samuel Doe,
who would soon bleed to death from his wounds; the resulting two-hour video, which includes the amputation of Doe's ears as he sat, naked, in a pool of blood, became "the hottest ticket in town," according to the journalist Ryszard Kapuściński, who reported from Monrovia. The Scorpions, a notorious Serb paramilitary group, filmed themselves as they executed unarmed Bosnian Muslims in Srebrenica; the resulting tape was bought by a journalist in an ordinary video store in Sid. All these images undermine the basic tenet of photojournalism: the belief that perpetrators seek to hide the crimes they commit and that exposing those crimes will lead to amelioration or justice.

Officials in Stalin's prisons, and Pol Pot's too, photographed some of their prisoners before they were executed; in both instances, meticulous records were kept. These photographs are among the most important, and worst, documents of the twentieth century. And while these prison pictures are not, obviously, examples of typical photojournalism, they reveal the great strengths and weaknesses of photographs of suffering. They were taken by perpetrators, yet they speak for the victims and are on the side of the victims. They sabotage their own intent; they are scalding self-accusations; they twist in upon themselves. But they also epitomize, in especially cruel ways, the inability of photographs to save the people they depict.

One devastating set of such images can be found in David King's 2003 book *Ordinary Citizens*, a collection of portraits of political prisoners taken by Stalin's secret police. The setting is Moscow's Lubyanka prison; most of the photographs, which are grainy and tightly framed, date from the 1930s. Each photograph is accompanied by a brief text, including the prisoner's place and date of birth, address, occupation, and political affiliation; dates of arrest, trial, and death are also recorded. All of the prisoners had been convicted in sham trials; all would be shot, often on the same day of their trials and sometimes in groups. Their crimes included sabotage, spying, terrorism, "betrayal of the Motherland," ties to the Gestapo or to the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, "political banditry," praising fascism, and, of course, Trotskyite deviations. Each prisoner was forced to conjure and sign a confession—thus, in a final admission of defeat, approving her own death; after execution, the prisoners' bodies were thrown into unmarked mass graves. The photographs, along with organized, neatly typed interrogations and confessions (King notes that efficiency was greatly helped by the arrival of the German comrades fleeing Hitler) were hidden until Gorbachev's glasnost brought them to light.

Those who think of Stalin's Russia as a dull monochrome will be surprised by King's book. The prisoners include Hungarians, Poles, Indians, Japanese, Koreans, Finns, Yugoslavs, Lithuanians, Turks, and one Vasily Vasilevich McKibbin; many, though not all, were members of their native Communist parties. There are elderly revolutionaries—old friends of Bukharin or Lenin—who had joined the party years before it was called Bolshevik, and a few prisoners who are in their late teens. We meet factory workers, students, peasants, economists, professors, scientists, journalists, soldiers, artists, shopkeepers, lithographers, bank clerks, doctors, electricians, housewives, a "Hero of the Soviet Union," secret policemen, and an itinerant monk. Most of the condemned were not widely known—these were, after all, ordinary citizens—though King shows a few who were prominent: Grigory Zinoviev, looking tough, sad, and furious; Osip Mandelstam, head held high, jaw jutting out; Isaac Babel, robbed of sight, for his captors had smashed his eyeglasses. (Babel's picture is blurred, as if echoing his impaired vision.)

None of these prisoners wear uniforms; their clothes and personal artifacts, along with their truncated biographies, offer a hint of the social worlds they inhabited. Some wear the plain, rough jackets and coarse shirts of the proletariat; others sport neat jackets and ties, or an elaborately embroidered shirt, or thin wire-rimmed eyeglasses. Van Iosifovich Vislyak, a Polish Communist journalist, wears a fur-trimmed coat; Emilya Markovna Shimkevich, a dark-haired actress, still has her beautiful striped scarf; Valentina Dybенко-Sedyakina, a housewife, would go to her death in her pretty polka-dotted dress.

Though taken under hideous conditions for hideous purposes, these are portraits rather than hurried mugshots. The jailers used cameras that required long exposure times, and they depended on natural light, not flashbulbs. The prisoners may have been shocked by their fate or by the trajectory of the revolution, by the betrayal of their neighbors or by the paranoia of the party: but the camera, at least, did not ambush them.
These are slow pictures, the opposite of snapshots. And so there is time for a panoply of reactions—time for the victims' characters—to be revealed. Each Soviet citizen faced imminent death as herself, bringing to this moment all that had gone before.

Georgy Vladimirovich Dobrodeev, a Ukrainian artist with a full beard and moustache, regards the camera with a furrowed brow and a proud look, as if he is indicting his tormentors. Ekaterina Alexeevna Zakharova, a farm worker with blazing eyes and wisps of long hair, looks like a haunted apparition. Alexei Grigorievich Zheltikov, a locksmith who had quit the party in a dispute over economic policy, almost explodes with fright. Yudif Gladshtein, a party member and civil servant, has huge, almond-shaped black eyes brimming with sorrow. Emerik Vitoldovich Rozhen-Andreev, a research fellow at the Lenin Library, faces the camera with a mysterious, sly smile. But the hint of a smile on Afrain Mikhailovich Shalyto, a journalist, is quite different, and seems to ask with weary irony: Et tu?

The prisoners of Pol Pot's regime were even more wretched than their Russian predecessors. And in Tuol Sleng prison they, too, were photographed before execution; a small selection of the resulting five thousand photographs was collected in a 1996 book called The Killing Fields.

Like Auschwitz, Tuol Sleng prison (also known as S-21) could accurately be described as "anus mundi." There, in what had formerly been a school, presumed enemies of the state were interrogated, tortured, starved, and killed, often by having their heads smashed. Trials, even the cosmetic kind, were unheard of (the Cambodian word for "prisoner" means "guilty person"); confessions exacted through torture were mandatory, and the condemned dug their own graves before mass executions. The prisoners' alleged crimes included working for the CIA, praising the old regime, hiding rice, stealing fruit, and "being fond of 'freedom.'" Like their Soviet precursors, the Cambodians were forced to create damning autobiographies and sign wildly fabricated confessions. On its own terms, Tuol Sleng was an extraordinary success: of the estimated fourteen thousand prisoners it received between 1975 and 1979, only seven are known to have survived. When the Vietnamese liberated Tuol Sleng in 1979, they found corpses chained to metal cots, blood-stained floors, shackles, chains, stacks of bodies in shallow graves, and handbooks of torture instruction.

**Figure 2.2**

Lubyanka Prison, Soviet Union, 1931: Ekaterina Alexeevna Zakharova, a farm worker, was one of many presumed enemies of the state who were photographed in Moscow's Lubyanka prison. Accused of espionage and forced to sign a false confession, she was executed four days after her "trial" concluded. Photographs of the victims of Stalin's prisons came to light in the Gorbachev era; Zakharova was "rehabilitated" in 1989.
Even after studying *Ordinary Citizens*, the S-21 photographs are a shock: there is simply no way to prepare for them. Many of the condemned had just arrived, blindfolded, at the prison, and had no idea where they were or why; some are chained to other prisoners. Illuminated by harsh light or flashes—which lends these pictures a stark, flat, weirdly "pure" look—faces of alarm, terror, and exhaustion stare out at us. There don't seem to be many scientists or journalists here, if indeed any still existed in Pol Pot's Cambodia; we see scrawny, weather-beaten peasants, usually wearing loose black shirts and pants. Some look sad or plaintive or angry or scared, but many look like nothing at all: perhaps they had moved beyond recognizable emotion.

The Tuol Sleng administration kept extensive records—the Vietnamese found thousands of documents—but the victims here are unidentified. This absence of information makes the photographs more brutal: the disorientation of the prisoners is reprised by the lacunae that surround them. There are no names, addresses, occupations, lists of crimes, or, even, dates of death. There is virtually nothing to tell us who these people used to be: now they are close to pure victims. And yet, even so, each is singular.

Number 6, an elderly man with a full head of gray hair, looks as if he is about to cry, as do several others. Number 573 no longer has a left eye. Number 17 is a young man with no shirt; his number is stuck to his naked chest with a safety pin. Two young men, Numbers 399 and 160, offer oily smiles. A wizened old man, unnumbered, purses his lips, while the deeply lined face of another elder seems to encapsulate generations of his country's sorrowful history. One of the most astonishing pictures here, in my view, is of a young woman (her number is hidden) with a smooth, unlined face, pale skin, almond eyes, and short black bangs. She looks at her captors with absolute calm, as if daring them to recognize her humanity.

Many women were arrested with their babies, who would meet the same fate as their mothers. Number 73 has a dark, sweaty, creased face and looks desolate; next to her, and almost cut off by the frame, her plump, black-shirted toddler looks up at the camera. Number 462 is a somewhat younger woman with pale skin and a blank look; she holds a sleeping infant in her arms. Number 246 has a wide face and a flat nose; her baby wears a knit hat with an unexpectedly cheerful pompom. Number 320 is a young woman who sits in a dirty cement cell. Behind her, on an iron bed, lies her naked baby, penis exposed; he stares up at the ceiling.

But most stunning are the many children, photographed on their own, who would be tortured and killed as counterrevolutionary enemies or as the soiled descendents of such. *The Killing Fields* opens, after several pitch-black pages, with the serene picture of a girl who looks to be about seven. She wears a neat, button-down gray shirt with a slightly wrinkled, gracefully rounded collar—an innocent, child's collar; her eyes are clear, her eyebrows slightly full; her jet-black hair is cut off just below her ears, with one side flipping upward. She looks reserved, dignified, and remarkably poised. But to stare at her as she stares at us is to enter into an abyss.

As if in a grotesque parody of a children's parade, she is followed by many others. Number 1 looks to be about seven; he has a full, high head of hair and thick lips; there is a chain around his neck. Number 186 is a skinny, wild-looking boy of perhaps nine whose face has been beaten and whose body is twisted by the adult to whom he is chained. A young girl with no number, who looks about twelve, wears a striped shirt and a frown; her smooth, neatly combed hair is held back by barrettes, as if she is ready for school or a party. Number 438 looks less than ten, and he furrows his eyebrows in bewildered sadness. Number 3, a skinny, almost adolescent girl, looks ravaged.

In the aftermath of the Shoah, Adorno wrote that "the need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth." The Lubyanka and Tuol Sleng photographs make clear—again—the utter necessity, and utter inadequacy, of all such voices. And this is true whether those voices take verbal or visual forms; whether they are shouts or whispers, strong or strangled; whether they are willingly articulated or, as with the Soviet and Cambodian photographs, produced through force. Description, documentation, testimony: each falls short in the wake of these insane slaughters. Mercy, when it was needed, was absent; reason, when it was called for, disappeared: these are the facts to confront, and these are the facts that resist.
Tuol Sleng, Cambodia, date unknown: Fourteen thousand people were sent to Tuol Sleng, the Khmer Rouge's most notorious torture center, in the years 1975–79; seven survived. Pol Pot's jailers, like Stalin's, often photographed their victims before they were killed; over five thousand mug shots have been discovered. The Cambodian prisoners' alleged crimes ranged from working for the CIA to "being fond of freedom." Children, like the nameless girl here, were executed as presumed counterrevolutionaries.

confrontation. To look at these pictures is necessary, but its only guarantee is failure. The closer one gets, the further a comprehensible world secedes; the more one knows, the less one understands. Here, surely, is the "grief . . . beyond healing" of which the prophet Jeremiah wrote.

Nor is simple identification with the victims possible. At the end of The Killing Fields, historian David Chandler writes, "Visiting the photographs in this book, we may be coming face to face, whether we like it or not, with . . . our shadow selves. We are inside S-21. Leafing through these pages, we become interrogators, prisoners, and passersby." I think that the opposite is true. One can mourn the people in Lubyanka and S-21—one must mourn, know what happened, and when, and how—but that should not be mistaken for closeness. We are not inside those prisons: they were. Our hells almost certainly are not theirs. Nor should the difference between looking at a photograph and torturing a child be quite so easily elided. (This is, I think, what Adorno meant when he warned against the "cozy existential atmosphere" in which "the distinction between victim and executioner becomes blurred.") To confuse the torturer with his prey—much less believe that you have somehow become one or the other—is not an expression of solidarity. It is, instead, an evasion of the immense, insurmountable difficulties—the inability to understand, the inability to grieve, the inability to act—that these photographs present. We cannot become the prisoners of S-21 any more than we can save them; it would be inexcusable to imagine that we can or did.

That is not an argument for not looking, not seeing, or not knowing, nor for throwing up one's hands or shielding one's eyes. Looking at these doomed people is not a form of exploitation; forgetting them is not a form of respect. But it would be good to eschew a knowledge that is easy, an identification that is glib, and a resolution that is cheap. Neither humanism nor history will bridge the chasm between we viewers and Number 5: we cannot become him, switch places with him, or reach back into history to protect him. We are simply too late. The "demands of justice" about which Adorno wrote will never—can never—be met, and the suffering of the victims will never be redeemed.

The earliest photojournalists expected images of injustice to push viewers into action; photographs were regarded not as expressions of alienation but as interventions in the world. Delia Falconer's elegiac 1997 novel The Service of Clouds expresses this hope beautifully. The protagonist, a woman photographer in early twentieth-century Australia, ends the book by telling us: "I have thought, if I find the right place, the right quality of light, I might take photographs so painful that they make people want to look
away, that they will feel the urge to enter and put right the world they
represent."

To turn from the image and put right the world: this is the photographic
ideal that still lives today. But like so many ideals, it has been chastened
by experience. Now we know that pictures of affliction can be easily igno-
red—or, even worse, enjoyed. Now we know that photographs of suf-
fering can be the start of human connection—and the endpoint to deadly
fantasies of revenge. Now we know the fatal gaps that exist between see-
ing, caring, understanding, and acting.

And so the important question, when we think about photography and
human rights, is not how many images we see, or how brutal or explicit
or "pornographic" they are. Nor can we blame photography for having
failed to vanquish violence; as James Nachtwey once argued, "The great-
est statesmen, philosophers, humanitarians... have not been able to put
an end to war. Why place that demand on photography?" The real issue
is how we use images of cruelty. Can they help us to make meaning of
the present and the past? If so, what meanings do we make, and how do we
act upon them? The ultimate answers to such questions reside not in the
pictures but in ourselves. **Photographers are responsible for the ethics
of showing, but we are responsible for the ethics of seeing.** "It is our his-
toric responsibility, not only to produce photos, but to make them speak,"
Ariella Azoulay has written. This requires transforming our relationship
to photographs from one of passivity and complaint to one of creativity
and collaboration, and it means regarding the violators of human rights—
not the photographers who document their victims—as the real "agents
of death."

It may be as hard for us to understand our new, chaotic visual environ-
ment as it was for Weimar citizens to master theirs; we are as conflicted
as were Benjamin and Kracauer. Images flood into our world in the old
days—through the printed press, films, and television—but also through
cell phones, iPods, satellite dishes, social-networking sites, and the Inter-
net. How to respond? Anxieties abound, and for good reasons. On the
Internet all photographs are equal: including doctored, manipulated, or
constructed photographs, and those without any meaningful—or with
entirely false—contexts. Thus Andy Grundberg has warned that the "lib-
erity of an unchecked image environment may prove to be less a blessing
than a subtle form of tyranny, and the democracy of the camera a perverse
kind of fascism." Certainly the new visual technologies have changed
the relationship between information, propaganda, and war. Even the Tal-
iban, which used to ban photographs, movies, and television as ungodly,
now has a video production unit that posts its advertisements for jihad—
its suicide bombings and executions—on the web. (I explore this develop-
ment in chapter 6.)

Yet digital photography and the Internet might also herald unprece-
dented possibilities for new, more egalitarian forms of visual participa-
tion—as Gilles Peress and some others argue—and be a boon to human-
rights activists everywhere. If digital photography has made viewers more
skeptical about the reality quotient of photographs—just what the post-
moderns had hoped—it has also made the making, transmitting, and
viewing of pictures incomparably easier and cheaper. (Baudelaire would
be displeased.) This has, admittedly, helped groups like the Taliban and
Al-Qaeda (it too runs a media production house). Yet the new technolo-
gies have also led to the emergence of transnational organizations such as
PhotoVoice, which teaches refugees and street children to expose the con-
tentions to disseminate otherwise unseen documentary work; and Demotix,
a "citizen journalism" website and photo agency that promises photog-
raphers, whether professional or amateur: "You take the images, we get
them out there."

The inspiring, and sometimes bloody, photographs we saw from the
2009 Iranian protests lend credence to the optimistic, prodemocracy in-
terpretation of the new media. Many of those photographs were taken by
nonprofessionals on their cell phones, then quickly circulated throughout
the world; one could find them everywhere from major newspapers to Face-
book. Yet the techno-utopianism these photographs prompted—some
writers hailed a "Twitter Revolution" and "a revolution in cinema verité
courtesy of YouTube"—strikes me as premature if not vastly overblown.
It was the old-fashioned forces—the old-fashioned guns—of the police,
the revolutionary militias, and the army that determined the outcome in
Chapter Two

Iran. As I write, Iran's courtrooms are hosting show trials, its jails are filled with members of the opposition, charges of rape and other state-sponsored tortures abound, and political prisoners are being executed.

Iran taught us, once again, that democratic images can strengthen a democracy but they can't create one. In the following chapters, we'll see how the relationship between the forces of violence and the images of violence has played itself out repeatedly, sometimes in counterintuitive ways. Those forces create a radically unequal dialectic—but not, I would argue, a hopeless one.

PART TWO

Places