

Trampled Realities: Discussion about Violent Images' Abuse

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"There is one thing the photograph must contain, the humanity of the moment".

Robert Frank.

Introduction

A relevant point to be taken into consideration could be the one related to violence images. The first step to analyze is if use of *other's* sufferance, to do objective information, could be considered ethic. It is a secondary element if this is done for a "good cause", such as projects' fundraising, or medias' audience increasing.

Everybody has the right to be respected, even more if he/she is in a tragic or suffering situation. Tears deserve respect: to violate them with a click may correspond to trample the person, his momentary sense of detachment from the world, his need to be lonely in the pain. The same consideration has to be done for strong images about violence or death. Images of a dead body, used as a symbol, or even worse, as a trophy, became a conscious degradation of civilization, and violate the international rights [1].

Principles and regulation of international communities, dealing with wars, are really severe regarding protection of life, dignity and images of all people involved in conflicts that to do not participate, or do not participate anymore to belligerency act, such as civilians, victims, prisoners, sick or dead people [2].

Although in her more recent writing Susan Sontag points out the importance and the need of suffering's pictures to tell about tragic events [3], she describes photography as an implicit aggression to the subject, as well as a not-intervention act in a situation [4].

"If numbers are related to people have to be written in letters.

Ciphers can be used for each accounting, but human lives".

Erri de Luca [5].

Strong Images Usefulness

Non-profit context plenty uses strong images to spread information, to sensitize the public opinion. However, what emerges from this choice is that, in spite of the many produced messages, people reaction is not adequate to committed atrocities. The spread of news occurred without related impact has been controlled and analyzed [6].

The importance of these messages circulation is out of discussion; stimulating knowledge to aware consciences in this sleeping world is an important objective, as well as saving freedom of press and expression from any kind of censure. However, it remains the doubt: can strong or violent images really impact on reception of the message? From studies of activities to promote human rights and supposed sensitization during their planning, expected results did not come out. The impact of message results reduced because of a lack of control on it (*Ibidem*).

Non-profit associations invest energy and time in spread of information, both in pictures choice and in incisive methodology, but there's not the same attention on message effect: it will hypothetically affect only people already inclined to the argument, for personal sensibility, or people really interested (*Ibidem*).

The meaning of this message risks to be generalized. In Africa children died for starvation since media started to talk about them; big numbers of victims from certain countries do not have importance: "just" another bomb, "just" another outrage, "just" another woman disfigured by acid. It seems these facts are becoming practice. It is forgotten that these numbers are actually people: mothers, sisters, grandparents, children who had big dreams, and who have now just a huge desperation.

The sterility of numbers or reports, as well as the sterility of terrible images without identity, could shock, but it doesn't make people think, or act, or simply take a position. As Roland Barthes suggested, a picture/image doesn't became subversive when it scares or upsets, but it does it when it is "thoughtful" [7]. In the same way, Susan Sontag, wrote that the supreme wisdom of photography images consists in their message: this is the surface; then you need to think or, at least, to perceive what is going on behind it, what reality should be if this is its own aspect. Knowledge coming from images will remain a form of sentimentalism, but it never be real [4].

Addiction from Images

Industrial societies transform their citizens in addicted to images, as the most irresistible form of mental contamination [4].

In the book "Stupid White Man", by Michael Moore, he reports an interesting suggestion: "(...) a black man being shot is no longer shocking. Just the opposite it's *normal*, natural. We've become so accustomed to seeing black men killed -in the movies and on the evening news- that we now accept it as standard operating procedure". This sensation happens frequently watching at media: they have the power to transform tragedy's images in a banality.

Violent images' abuse brings consciences to addiction. Roland Barthes analyzed this kind of pictures as they have a lack of particular, made just to give a strong shock, but not perturbation: photography could shout, but not hurt, as if it couldn't be possible to keep memory of it [7].

Susan Sontag stands that people pay the price of their ability to bear the increase of horrible, in images and words, with a skill's reduction to react to it, in real life. "The images paralyze, they anesthetize. When you are repeatedly exposed to too many images, they become less real. (...) Indeed the images are a form of aesthetic consumerism to which we all are engaged. Today everything exists to end up in an image" [4].

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Images' Inflation

In 1985 a BBC's documentary about Ethiopian starving children, upset Italian public opinion in a way to determined the approbation of a parliamentary law to define extraordinary economical funds to eradicate world hunger. This is not thinkable nowadays, considering the number of even worse images people are addicted to. Once again the great Sontag argues that images upset if and when they show something new [4].

Looking at the huge number of media, in all their form, it becomes difficult to find out something new that could hit: it is necessary to create a "deflationary regime" to fight this big increase of violent images and facts that are now confounded in the multitude [8]. To keep on seeing them it is necessary to create an added value that could be the style, but this open the way to another serious risk: aesthetic could compromise information's verification and completeness (*Ibidem*), or, even worst, it could cause revisionism and falsification of truth.

Another element is that sometimes beauty, as well as the absolute perfection of a picture, gives eyes (and heart) such a big gift to enchant and to make forget the tragic message that picture itself could transmit. In order to result unforgettable, a picture becomes an eternal image that transforms tragedy in an object of enjoyment [7].

Conclusion

It is clear that suffering images are less incisive if the goal is to sensitize people to a problem or, more easily, to make them think.

The risk of addiction from images, with related chronic drowsiness of consciousness, is another problem that has to be considered. Strong

images about war or suffering could be useful for communication marketing, but this should not be taken into consideration if the main point is to respect human rights.

It should be supported the importance of a photograph documentation to report facts: it makes them more real and tangible, but this documentation doesn't have to be only made of tears or blood.

It could be considered the hypothesis of consciousness of portrayed subject, to guarantee his/her own dignity. This doesn't mean the unhappy consciousness that Diane Arbus mentioned, where the subject consents to be shot, ignoring to express suffering or grotesque's sense, but considering the possibility of an active participation of subject in bringing his story to the world.

It should not occur that people are not-interested in seeing somebody's dignity in getting out from ruins, both related to the country or to personal conditions. This could be the most incisive way to tell a story, it doesn't matter how much tragic it could be.

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