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Visual images and how we see the world

Media critics often say that visual images trump words. The claim makes some sense: Pictures have major impacts on how we see the world. And we're apt to pay less attention to photo captions or the voice-overs that accompany news footage on TV screens.

But when images meet the eye, our reactions depend on our sense of context. The same news outlets that select certain photos and video snippets also influence how we look at what we see. The pictures can have political clout because of prevalent assumptions and attitudes largely shaped by media.

Many people reacted strongly to President Bush's "top gun" imitation when he jetted onto an aircraft carrier near San Diego a couple of months ago. Bush fans and pliable journalists swooned. More skeptical observers noticed the shameless manipulation. But everyone was looking at identical images. The determining factor was not the choreography of the photo-op but the outlooks of those who watched.

Let's say a magazine photograph, taken in a war zone, shows a mother holding a baby covered with blood. Two people – looking at the same photo – could perceive the suffering quite differently. One might see an unfortunate-though-unavoidable casualty of war. Another might see a victim of a war crime.

If the finger of blame can be pointed in a direction we already distrust or despise, then outrage is likely. If the apparent perpetrators are amorphous or held in high esteem, then we're more likely to shrug. (That's life. Bad luck. War is like that.)

"Photographs of an atrocity may give rise to opposing responses," Susan Sontag comments. "A call for peace. A cry for revenge. Or simply the bemused awareness, continually restocked by photographic information, that terrible things happen. ... Information about what is happening elsewhere, called 'news,' features conflict and violence – 'If it bleeds, it leads' runs the venerable guideline of tabloids and 24-hour headline news shows – to which the response is compassion, or indignation, or titillation, or approval, as each misery heaves into view."

Sontag's book "Regarding the Pain of Others" is a challenge to common

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assumptions about the powerful effects of camera work, whether in print or on television or on museum walls. A strength of the book is that it helps to clarify the social role of the photograph: "its meaning – and the viewer's response – depends on how the picture is identified or misidentified; that is, on words."

Published four months ago, the book points out: "In the current political mood, the friendliest to the military in decades, the pictures of wretched hollow-eyed GIs that once seemed subversive of militarism and imperialism may seem inspirational. Their revised subject: ordinary American young men doing their unpleasant, ennobling duty."

Sontag notes: "The image as shock and the image as cliché are two aspects of the same presence." Later on, when she acknowledges that "harrowing photographs do not inevitably lose their power to shock," Sontag immediately adds: "But they are not much help if the task is to understand."

The publication date of "Regarding the Pain of Others" came just days before the U.S. government launched its all-out war on Iraq. The Pentagon's PR innovation of "embedding" reporters and photographers during the war does not reduce the validity of Sontag's assessment when describing "the preferred current American way of war-making." She writes: "Television, whose access to the scene is limited by government controls and by self-censorship, serves up the war as images. The war itself is waged as much as possible at a distance, through bombing, whose targets can be chosen, on the basis of instantly relayed information and visualizing technology, from continents away."

With its thoughtful explorations of visual images in a world of war and deprivation, hopefully Sontag's latest book will disrupt some pat assumptions. Photographic images "cannot be more than an invitation to pay attention, to reflect, to learn, to examine the rationalizations for mass suffering offered by established powers," she concludes. "Who caused what the picture shows? Who is responsible? Is it excusable? Was it inevitable? Is there some state of affairs which we have accepted up to now that ought to be challenged?"

Such questions are crucial. We should strive to come up with honest answers – and take appropriate action. ■

Norman Solomon is co-author of "Target Iraq: What the News Media Didn't Tell You." For an excerpt and other information, go to: www.contextbooks.com/new.html#target