

1. Bearing Witness, Bringing Change, or Trauma Porn?

In 2019, *The New York Times* received thousands of photographs taken inside an Alabama prison and depicted appalling living conditions, gruesome injuries, and death. *The Times* initially published just five of these photos in an article opened with the question: “Would we fix our prisons if we could see what happens inside them?”¹ In support of the decision to publish the photos, some have argued that showing these horrific images brings attention to the costs of social problems like mass incarceration, which are often hidden from public view and scrutiny.² Graphic photos, on this view, have the capacity not only to inform the public, but to make them care about those depicted. Images can elicit a response by making the situation feel more real and urgent to onlookers, resulting in demands for change. Filmmaker and professor Ariella Azoulay goes even further, arguing that photographs of suffering and injustice actually create a moral obligation on the part of the viewer.³ Azoulay claims that photographers and people who allow their pain and suffering to be photographed assume that one day the pictures will find an audience who will do something about it. If pictures fail to bring about change, it is because audiences have failed to live up to their obligations.

Even if an individual viewer cannot help to bring about change, some suggest there might be value in “bearing witness.” Refusing to push unpleasant realities out of one’s mind might be a sign of moral strength or evidence of compassion. In a 2003 essay, Susan Sontag points out that the existence of the Holocaust Memorial Museum and the lack of a similar museum chronicling slavery in the U.S. enables Americans to conceive of evil as something committed by *other* people in *other* countries.⁴ It would be more honest to recognize our own history, even if it cannot be changed. Even if one can do nothing more than observe films or photographs of tragedy and atrocity, paying attention to it is a way of recognizing it as wrong and affirming the humanity of those who suffer. Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel, a writer, advocate, and Holocaust survivor said “We tell these stories because perhaps we know that not to listen, not to want to know, would lead you to indifference, and indifference is never an answer.”⁵

Some criticize the publication of images like these, and see depictions of gruesome or tragic events as exploitative. Critics suggest that these depictions may harm a victim of injustice or their family members. One blogger suggests that many view shocking images or share them on social media to feel politically engaged without actually taking action or reflecting on injustice.⁶ Others argue that it is unfair for victims of trauma to shoulder the additional burden of sharing their pain publicly in order to garner public concern.⁷ To some, the way images of violence and injustice are perpetuated only seems to further dehumanize oppressed groups. These images are shared in ways that seems more like an awful kind of entertainment than something of ethical import.⁸

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What moral value, if any, is there in viewing photos or videos of tragedy and injustice? To what extent does this value depend on whether the viewer can do, or actually does, anything about it?
2. Does viewing an image of pain, suffering, or injustice make a person responsible for doing something about it?
3. What moral considerations ought someone be mindful of when creating, publishing, viewing, or sharing images of tragedy and suffering?

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/30/us/inside-americas-black-box.html>

² <https://www.motherjones.com/crime-justice/2019/04/2000-leaked-photos-show-the-cruelty-of-an-alabama-prison-should-they-be-published/>

³ <https://www.newyorker.com/books/second-read/how-we-should-respond-to-photographs-of-suffering>

⁴ https://monoskop.org/images/a/a6/Sontag_Susan_2003_Regarding_the_Pain_of_Others.pdf

⁵ <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/elie-wiesel-days-of-remembrance-excerpts>

⁶ <https://duckofminerva.com/2015/09/image-voyeurism-trauma-porn-and-doing-something-for-yourself.html>

⁷ <https://www.bustle.com/p/why-did-some-women-choose-not-to-post-a-me-too-story-women-share-why-they-didnt-participate-in-the-movement-2961946>

⁸ <https://goodmenproject.com/featured-content/stop-sharing-black-pain-wcz/>