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Against Neutrality

THE PHOTOGRAPH AND the words arrive simultaneously. They guarantee each other. You believe the words more because the photograph verifies them, and trust the photograph because you trust the words. Additionally, each puts further pressure on the interpretation: a war photograph can, for example, make a grim situation palatable, just as a story about a scandal can make the politician depicted look pathetic. But images, unlike words, are often presumed to be unbiased. The facticity of a photograph can conceal the craftiness of its content and selection.

This is why I noticed a tweet by John Edwin Mason, a historian of photography: "Another reminder that manipulation in photography isn't really about Photoshop or darkroom tricks." Embedded below this line was another tweet, which contained the photograph of a young woman. She was blond and wore a scoop-neck black sweater over a white blouse. Her eyes looked off to the side. The photograph was black and white, reminiscent of old Hollywood headshots. There was a link to an article at *Foreign Policy*'s website, and the subject of both the article and the photograph was Marion Maréchal-Le Pen, a twenty-six-year-old French politician and rising star of the far-right Front National. Maréchal-Le Pen is the granddaughter of the enthu-

siastically racist Jean-Marie Le Pen, co-founder of the Front National. She has been careful not to sound too much like her grandfather, but she remains closely associated with his nativist priorities and xenophobic vision. She holds, for instance, the charming view that Muslims in France should not be allowed to have the same "rank" as Catholics. In a France gripped by anti-immigrant fears in the wake of terrorist attacks, Maréchal-Le Pen and the Front National have had obvious appeal and increased political success.

What kind of communication happens when a sympathetic photograph is used to profile a figure like Maréchal-Le Pen? I asked Mason what he meant by "manipulation" in his tweet. "The style of photography is instantly recognizable as that of a celebrity profile," he replied. "It's inviting us to identify with the subject and see the subject as attractive and desirable. If you wanted to glamorize young [Maréchal-Le Pen], you'd pick precisely this photo." Benjamin Pauker, the executive editor of *Foreign Policy*, sees nothing untoward in the image (by the photographer Joel Saget), and he objected to the idea that it was in some way glamorous. But it was hard not to contrast Saget's image, which appeared on the home page, with another, by Patrick Aventurier, that accompanied the full text of the piece. Aventurier's photograph is in color, and it shows Maréchal-Le Pen on the podium, at a distance, with several other people, and with French flags in the foreground and background. This photograph, by emphasizing Maréchal-Le Pen's political role as well as her nationalism, sends a clearly different message.

The right image to use with a written piece: it's an old worry, relevant to portraiture, but argued about much more with regard to war photography. The question has been taken up again

by the writer David Shields, in his recent book *War Is Beautiful: The New York Times Pictorial Guide to the Glamour of Armed Conflict*. Shields believes that *The New York Times*, in particular, “glorified war through an unrelenting parade of beautiful images.” He selected sixty-four photos from the thousands that ran on page A1 of the *Times* between 2002 and 2013 and arranged them into ten brief chapters under titles like “Playground,” “Father,” “God,” and “Pieta.”

The book includes a number of crepuscular or otherwise moodily colored scenes of choppers and trucks that could be outtakes from *Apocalypse Now*. But we also see a navy doctor cradling an Iraqi orphan, President George W. Bush meeting U.S. troops in Qatar, the blasted landscape of an Iraqi city, an imam blessing a newborn in Brooklyn, a grief-stricken Palestinian man carrying a boy killed during a protest, and a dead Iraqi soldier lying in the dust. Are these sixty-four photos, some of which are not war pictures at all, representative of *The New York Times*’ coverage over the decade in question? Even on the evidence Shields presents, the *Times* has published some great images, some less great ones, some that could be read as antiwar and some that could be read as pro-war propaganda. Imagine looking at a pile of thousands of photographs taken over many years by a wide range of photojournalists: you would be able to select sixty-four to suit just about any argument.

An image depends radically on context, on how it is placed but also on who is looking at it. Susan Sontag observed: “The frankest representations of war, and of disaster-injured bodies, are of those who seem most foreign, therefore least likely to be known. With subjects closer to home, the photographer is expected to be more discreet.” American journalism, *The New York Times* included, remains in thrall to this expectation, an ex-

pectation that is ripe for sustained and perceptive critique. But *War Is Beautiful* is not that critique. It feels instead like a missed opportunity, and it made me return to other recent projects that have addressed related questions more incisively.

Disco Night Sept. 11 (2014), by the photojournalist Peter van Agtmael, is not as high-concept as Shields’s book. In fact, it is not conceptual at all. It is simply a courageous record of recent American wars by a photojournalist who made repeated trips to dangerous outposts in Afghanistan and Iraq, but who also visited injured and bewildered American veterans in places like Wisconsin and Texas. Van Agtmael captions most of the photos with a paragraph or so of reportage, and his captions are no less resonant than his uncannily crisp, dreamlike photos. A typical image is one taken in 2009 in Helmand Province, Afghanistan. Against a pale brown desertified landscape, seven soldiers are seen sweeping the ground for improvised explosive devices. Each man is separated from the others by a few paces. They are working together, but each is alone, and at this distance and from this height (it is hard to tell if the photographer is in a helicopter or on a rise), the men look like toy soldiers. They search, and they find nothing. Minutes later, there’s an explosion. *Disco Night Sept. 11*, which presents many images from the moments just before something terrible happens or, even more vividly, from the years of aftermath, conveys the madness, confusion, theatricality, and ironies of war. It made me think what any book about war photography should: Just what the hell is going on here?

A very different project is *War Primer 2* (2011), by the artists Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin. Like Shields, Broomberg and Chanarin make use of appropriated imagery. In their case, it is actually an appropriation of an appropriation: *War*

Primer 2 is based on Bertolt Brecht's *Kriegsfiabel (War Primer, 1955)*, a book of press photographs, largely culled from newspapers and magazines from the previous decades, that Brecht captioned with bitter, poetic quatrains.

For their update, Broomberg and Chanarin have pasted photographs associated with the Global War on Terrorism, downloaded from the Internet, into Brecht's book, layering them directly onto his original images. The new photos, as visceral, graphic, and sometimes plainly horrific as the old ones, include scenes of the tortures at Abu Ghraib, Saddam Hussein's execution, the White House during the mission to assassinate Osama bin Laden, and George W. Bush serving soldiers at Thanksgiving. Alongside Brecht's lines, the images become an uncanny indictment of American conduct in these recent wars, but also a lament about the evil of war in general.

The camera is an instrument of transformation. It can make what it sees more beautiful, more gruesome, milder, darker, all the while insisting on the plain reality of its depiction. This is what Brecht meant in 1931 when he wrote, "The camera is just as capable of lying as the typewriter." What then are we to do with this devious tool? One option is to resist the depiction of violence, to side with the reader who protests an unpleasant photograph and defends the bounds of good taste. But another—and to me, better—option is to understand that the problem is not one of too many unsettling images but of too few. When the tragedy or suffering of only certain people in certain places is made visible, the boundaries of good taste are not really transgressed at all. "We all have strength enough to bear the misfortunes of others," La Rochefoucauld wrote. What is hard is being vividly immersed in our own pain. We ought to see what actually happens to American bodies in situations of

war or mass violence, whether at the moment they happen, as Broomberg and Chanarin show us, or in the wake of the violence, as presented in van Agtmael's book. We must not turn away from what that kind of suffering looks like when visited on "us." Photojournalism relating to war, prejudice, hatred, and violence pursues a blinkered neutrality at the expense of real fairness. (Domestically, this manifests as a tolerance for black suffering that would not be extended to white suffering; the proliferation of videos of black people being killed by police, for example.) All too often in our media, the words take us all the way there, but the photographs, habituated to a certain safety, hold back.