

Through the Lens

EXPLORING DISCRIMINATION IN WAR PHOTOGRAPHY

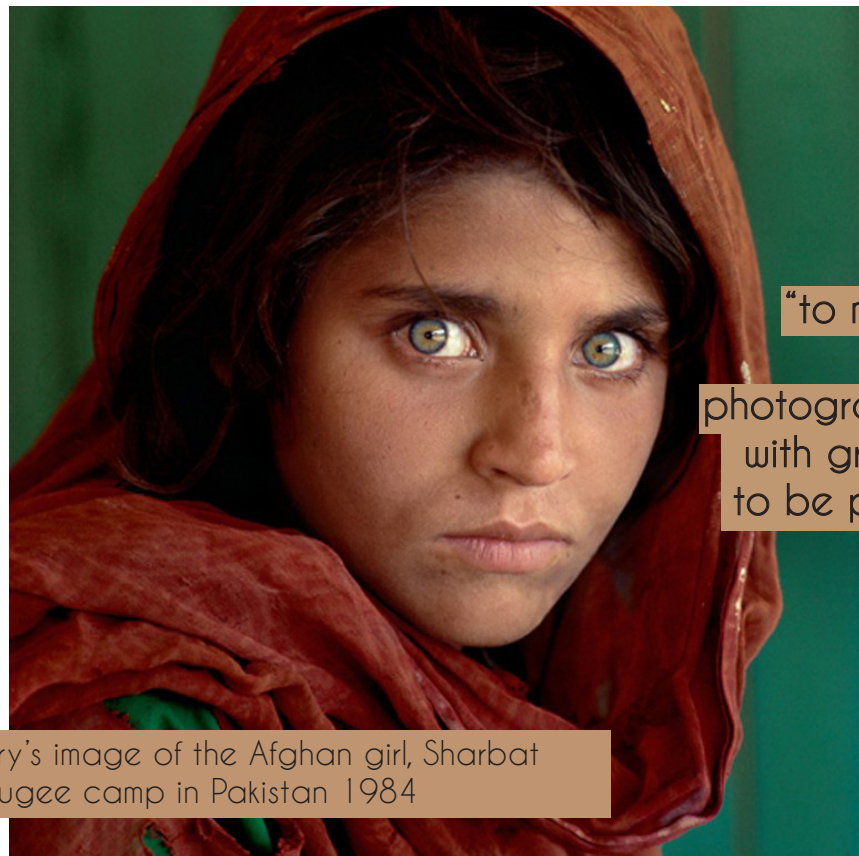


by Taylor Moreno

It starts in black and white, a Japanese soldier thrown in the dirt. A group of Australian soldiers towering over his corpse, their guns still pointed at the motionless figure, a faint smile plastered on their face. Next, it's bright green, the color of her eyes. An Afghan girl, the age of 12, now an iconic cover image. She is nameless. They come in all forms, some in magazines, others distressed with ripped edges. Black and white, colored, graphic corpses, average citizens. These are the images of war.

But have you ever stopped to think about the image? About what goes into making it and what surrounds it? They say a picture is worth a thousand words, but what are these words saying? And perhaps most importantly, what do they stand for, are they discriminatory?

Amit Majmudar, award-winning novelist and poet, thinks they are discriminatory. Let's go back to the Steve McCurry photo, the one of the nameless Afghan girl. In his essay *Five Famous Asian War Photographs*, Majmudar points to her eyes. They are green. A recessive trait. Something that could resemble you or me. It is this small detail that means everything. Whether mystery or empathy, it is this that draws you in and differentiates her from the "default Asian." But this isn't the only strategy that can be used when pointing to discrimination in war photography. For instance, take the photo of the detainee at Abu Ghraib. Here there are no green eyes to move you. Here there are no eyes at all. He is hooded, draped in black. Despite most of the Abu Ghraib's torture victims being stripped naked, this one remains hooded. It is the only way you could picture someone like you or me in that situation, underneath the hood. Because, like the nameless Afghan girl, Majmudar points out, "to move us to empathy, one had to be photographed as a female child with green eyes. The other had to be photographed without a face at all. (Robert Atwan, 131)"



"to move us to empathy, one had to be photographed as a female child with green eyes. The other had to be photographed without a face at all."

Steve McCurry's image of the Afghan girl, Sharbat Gula, in a refugee camp in Pakistan 1984

But does this reflect on discrimination in all war photography? In a survey I conducted among 24 individuals with general knowledge of photography, 88% agreed with Majmudar that at least one of the photos mentioned in his essay was discriminatory. While some agreed that the focus falls on the Afghan girl's eyes rather than her ethnicity, many of the reasons for deeming the photos discriminatory differed. For instance, many stated that it wasn't the fact that the hooded Abu Ghraib prisoner remained faceless, but rather that the hood seemed to allude to a different historical context: the Klu Klux Klan. While still considered discriminatory, this reasoning redefines the historical context of the photograph completely. John Mann, a scholar and photography professor at Florida State University, believes that the context is an essential part of defining war photography, stating "war photography is always based on text... because they don't exist as solo images, they don't come up as art photographs."

This misunderstanding of context is a propaganda strategy tool that the media has employed for decades. One that scholars Theo van Leeuwen and Adam Jaworski say can be found in both the Polish, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, and the British *Guardian*. Van Leeuwen, former dean of Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Technology in Sydney, and Jaworski, a professor known for his research in media discourse and nonverbal communication, compare the two publications and their coverage of the Palestinian-Israeli occupation. Despite drawing from the same photographic archive, the way in which these publications use the images to depict their ideological beliefs differs tremendously. The *Guardian* uses these images to depict the Palestinian soldiers as heroes, the *Gazeta Wyborcza*, as terrorists.

In her poem *War Photographer*, poet Carol Ann Duffy describes how publications will choose images that they think will best affect the reader, "A hundred agonies in black-and-white from which his editor will pick out five or six for Sunday's supplement. The reader's eyeballs prick with tears between bath and pre-lunch beers...they do not care. (Duffy)" Van Leeuwen and Jaworski argue that the *Gazeta Wyborcza* and the *Guardian* used this strategy to promote two very different ideological beliefs.

Award-winning photojournalist, Jan Grarup believes that "good photojournalism should not answer questions, it should raise questions, so my photography is reflection. I want people to look at the work and make up their own mind [about] how do I feel about what I'm looking at." Some, however, have taken a different approach, using repetition in themes of imagery to provide an answer. With both armed and unarmed Palestinians, alone and in groups, the *Gazeta Wyborcza* enforces a theme of Palestinian combative action throughout their publication, comprising a total of 68% of their pictures. Compared to the 13 action shots in the *Gazeta Wyborcza*, it may seem like the 22 combat images in the *Guardian* dwarf it, but with more images, it results in only 38% of all the photographs. That 38% includes protest of stone-throwing and other related images where the Palestinians are shown as recognizable individuals. The photos in the *Gazeta Wyborcza* offer Palestinians in a different light, one with a mask to cover their faces and armed soldiers. Thus, Van Leeuwen and Jaworski conclude, it allows the *Gazeta Wyborcza* to paint the Palestinians as "terrorists," whereas the *Guardian* tends to show them as "lone romantic heroes." While some masked Palestinians, both civilians and protestors do occur in the *Guardian*, it's a balanced ratio of recognizable individuals to anonymous masked figures that allows them to paint Palestinians in a more favorable and heroic light than their Polish counterpart does. Thus, the discriminatory aspect of the photograph depends on what publications the viewer sees it in. One survey participant states that it's the media's job to "filter out the work so that it won't trigger anyone but also, so the viewers do get a realistic view of war."

But what if during that process the authenticity of the photograph is comprised? Images may be cropped, edited, or distorted to portray a certain viewpoint. I sat down with John Mann, a photography professor at Florida State University and freelance photographer, to discuss his experience with editorial manipulations. He squeezed past the bike sitting slanted in the middle of his office and stood in front of the bookshelf that expanded most of the wall. Most of the books had photography in the name; others were catalogs of his own work. He shuffled through the stack before returning to his desk with a magazine, a small chuckle situated on his lips. He explained that he had done a job for *GQ* magazine. "It's funny that I even did this," he recalls. The job was about drug cartels. Mann admits that he knew the general scope of how they would use his picture, but he wasn't able to read the article before. His photo was edited, cropped to take only part of it. It was standard editorial work. Aside from cropping, the photo was used in a similar way to what Mann agreed to, but not all can say the same. Mann explains that the malleability of photography is often taken advantage of. "If you want a photo of a young teenager you can buy a photo like that ... and then you get to put whatever message you want on there, and that message could be a picture of a teen saying I love getting food at Chick-fil-A or I just had an abortion," Mann explains.

Van Leeuwen and Jaworski's study reaches a similar conclusion. Instead of depicting the Palestinians in an unfavorable light, *The Guardian* continues to enforce the opposite take of the *Gazeta Wyborcza*, by victimizing the Palestinians. Corpses of victims, closed-eyed griever, wounded civilians. These are just some of the images that flood the pages of the *Guardian*. It is the most prevalent theme. And it continues to enforce a theme of romanticized heroism, one that differs greatly from the menacing terrorists depicted in the *Gazeta Wyborcza*. As one survey participant put it, "there is an old saying - a picture is worth a thousand words. The thing is, everyone is contributing their 'words' to the narrative of pictures... They see what they are conditioned to see, and the media will often 'tell' readers what to see/think/feel about pictures."

But what about the photographer's ability to manipulate a photograph? Before they are even taken, photographers have the ability to create a different narrative. The angle of a photograph can tell a new story completely. And what about photos that are staged; how can the public trust what they're representing? Don McCullin, British photojournalist famous for documenting war and urban strife, admits to staging one of his iconic images to the *Economist*, *A Young Dead North Vietnamese Soldier with His Possessions*. It was 1968, the early morning rain cascading down. In the dirt lay a North Vietnamese Soldier. He was dead. A bullet through the teeth. His "pathetic" possessions had been kicked and thrown by American marines. "The rape of a death of a hero," McCullin recalls. He photographed it. In the decades that followed, McCullin received many questions about the photograph, all wanting to know if it had been staged. It certainly had. "I thought I'm gonna make something of this situation. It's so wrong and so bad that this amazing young man...in his own country and amongst his own culture to be disregarded by these foreign soldiers," McCullin answers. He explains that he took the time to gather his meager possessions, laying them in front of him. "I made a statement about his sacrifice. I wanted to be his voice by using his statement, his possessions," McCullin says.



Don McCullin, 1968

Don McCullin's image of a young dead north Vietnamese soldier with his possessions in 1968.

Van Leeuwen and Jaworski speak of the publication's responsibility but not of that of the photographers. Where is this line of responsibility drawn? Does it veer toward the media or the one making the photo? Perhaps it lands somewhere in the middle? And what happens when war photographers are given specific orders about what they should shoot? This was the case of Robert Fenton, a war photographer who was responsible for capturing the Crimean War. A favorable light, that's what the brief instructed. Officers drinking and smoking, parties between French and English troops, captured forts -once the bodies had been removed. For this, Fenton faced scrutiny. He was met with criticism from *The First Casualty* author Phillip Knightley:

"Fenton did not bother to unpack his camera. He knew the sort of photograph he should take, and this was not one of them."

George Silk, 1942



George Silks image of George Whittington being led to safety by Raphael Oimbari on Christmas Day 1942.

But not everyone was as obliged to follow the rules as Robert Fenton. George Silk, an Australian war photographer, didn't follow the orders he was given by the Department of Information, DoI when photographing the Pacific War. Scenes of dead or life-threatening Australians were forbidden. Whereas, photos of Japanese corpses were encouraged. The goal: use photos as propaganda to enforce the view of Japanese soldiers as weak and inferior. Graphic photos of Japanese soldiers were permitted because the media used propaganda to dehumanize them. Words like "cockroach" erased ethical concerns. Photos of beaten Japanese corpses littered the film. Silk's photo was of a wounded and blindfolded Australian. A local Papua New Guinea tribesman carried him to safety. The DoI marked it as "too grim." It went on to become one of the war's most famous photos.

Even so, who sets the boundaries that deem certain photographs discriminatory? Perhaps it's not the text that defines the photograph, but rather the photographer's experience. Let's go back to the nameless Afghan girl. Behind those iconic green eyes lies the story of a photographer. Born and raised in Pennsylvania, McCurry has since been around the world with his work as an award-winning photojournalist. It's not every job that you've almost drown during a Bombay festival, been robbed in your hotel room in Afghanistan, been arrested in Pakistan, or almost died in a plane crash in Bosnia. But, for Steve McCurry, these are the extremes that the perfect picture sometimes requires.

While perhaps less life-threatening, the photographing process behind the green eyes proved a similar difficulty. It was 1984. In the chaos of an Afghanistan refugee camp was a girl's school tent. McCurry, cautious of offending local customs, asked the teacher for permission to enter and take a couple photographs. He started with the other students leaving the shyest, the girl with green eyes, for last. At the time, McCurry didn't think much of the photos he had taken. There wasn't anything to differentiate them from the rest of the day's shots;

it was only when he saw the film that he was shocked by how still the photo seemed. It went on to become one of the most iconic images of Afghanistan and was featured as the cover image of *National Geographic* multiple times. It's even been likened to the Mona Lisa. Years later and McCurry and a *National Geographic* team set out to find the girl. They had no name, just a picture and the name of a refugee camp.

It wasn't until 2001 that the two would meet again, the camera lens once again connecting them. As a now-married woman, she is not allowed to look at a man who is not her husband. "I could see her eyes through the camera lens. They're the same. Her skin is weathered, there are wrinkles now, but she's as striking as the young girl I photographed 17 years ago," McCurry recounts (McCurry). Still, they exchange some words. McCurry tells her of the letters he's received; that she's served as an inspiration. She admits to being embarrassed about the burned holes that spotted her red Shaw several years ago. Sharbat Gula, that once nameless girl now has a name. McCurry says he intends to check in on her for the rest of his life.

Or perhaps it's more the story behind the photo. Maybe it's the intention in which the photograph is taken. When discussing his book *Portraits*, a catalog of portraits including the infamous *National Geographic* cover of Sharbat Gula, McCurry says "the images speak of a desire for human connection; a desire so strong that people who know they will never see me again open themselves to the camera, all in the hope that at the other end someone else will be watching, someone who will laugh or suffer with them." When photographing, McCurry tries to capture the human aspect of the picture, intending to convey empathy and communicate what it's like to be the subject. That is why he likes to photograph eyes. They tell stories. Stories that offer up much about them and their past experiences. Like most war photographers, McCurry risks his life to tell these stories.

Some even give their life in pursuit of these stories. Take Tim Hetherington, a photojournalist, and co-producer of the Oscar-nominated documentary *Restrepo*, who died at the age of 40 while documenting in Libya. His death went on to haunt hundreds, and even inspired his co-producer, Sebastian Junger, to make a documentary about Hetherington's life. Hetherington's most notable work, *Restrepo*, follows an American platoon in the Afghanistan war. Instead of documenting the combat of war, it documents the emotional side. Hetherington had the idea that war was the only place young men could openly show affection for each other without it be interpreted as something sexual. *Restrepo* attempted to act as a gateway for the general public into the complexities of war. When asked about his work, Hetherington said, "the American army provides a physical way to embed yourself in the unit but Sebastian and I, we didn't want to be physically embedded we wanted to be emotionally embedded (*Sundance Studios*)." Days after the fatal explosion in Libya, Ajdabiya, a Libyan city, named their largest square in memory of Hetherington. Deaths like Hetherington's are the reality that war photographers often face.

Coated with mental anguish, war photographers hunt out these stories. The work of a war photographer is not just life-threatening; it's life-altering. These pictures come with a price. It's the co-worker who survived a kidnapping only to die a year later of an asthma attack. It's returning from photographing starving children, only to see your own family refuse their Sunday Lunch. It's the constant fear, wondering if the next bullet will be you. But most of all, it's the constant questioning. "The majority of the last 50 years of my life has been wasted photographing wars, what good have I done sharing these pictures of suffering?" Don McCullin asks Dunhil. It wasn't for the victims; "you know when a person is dying or injured badly, he's in shock, does he need you looking over him with a camera, you're the last person he wants to see" he recalls. Quality of life isn't a benefit that comes with the job; the mind always finds a way to remind you of the atrocities you've seen. "It's all very difficult, but isn't being a human being difficult?" McCullin asks, the horrors of war staining his eyes. He has seen people die. Soldiers buried in the rubble of combat, children starved in poverty, and war photographers caught in the chaos. "That's the hardest part about this job, there's no explanation," Lynsey Addario, photojournalist and author of *What I Do: A Photographer's Life of Love and War* explains in an interview with *CNN*. They had asked about Tim Hetherington. A photojournalist she had once worked with, now dead. The job had killed him. Other names started to lace together with his, Chris Hondros, Anja Niedringhau, Molhem Barakat, all victims of the job. And the unanswerable question still remains: Why do it, why be a war photographer? Lynsey still doesn't have an answer.



Vietnamese Mahayana Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc burns himself to death in Saigon in June of 1963.

Fire rises. Beneath it is a monk. He has lit himself on fire in protest. Much like Robin Gerster's argument about the sensationalism of the photographed beaten Japanese soldiers, Amit Majmudar, argues that it is the pictures graphicness that draws us in. It's the moment before death. It's dramatic; it captures you. The monk burns. "The photographed monk is still alive in the fire; a photograph of a burning corpse would fail to have this effect...**corpses leave us cold.**" What happens after the photo? How many buckets of water did it take to get his remains off the street? Do people notice the blotch when they walk by it? Majmudar wonders.

Perhaps it would be easier to disregard war photography- the editors, the media, the photographers, and the images themselves. Forget the tribesman leading his enemy to safety or the Vietnamese soldier whose belongings were carefully placed in front of him. But these are more than just photographs; they're stories. Stories that, as Patrick Chauvel, an independent war photographer, points out, remind us that "peace is fantastic, but it is threatened by war all the time." Stories that hold the human race accountable. "[War photographers are] not only working for the news; we also work for the archives and for the history books;" that is why war photography is essential, Chauvel argues (history net).

Whether it's the blaze of a burning monk or the green eyes of a twelve-year-old girl, these are the iconic photos of war. They are intertwined with the photographers who took them, and the editors who published them. Their meaning resting with the viewer. "The power of the pen and the expression of photography has the ability to influence society; it can change lives, relive the past, and impact the future." At the end of the day, whether the responsibility lands in the laps of the media, the photographer, or the viewer, "There is no good War and/or non-discriminatory War, it's just war, no matter the intent."