

# Through the lens essay

[Design](#), [Photography](#)



Does a Picture Really Tell A Thousand Words? According to John Berger, photographs from August 6th, 1945, are “ images of hell. ” (316) That was the day the US dropped an atomic bomb on Japan, killing countless innocent civilians and severely burning others. In his essay, “ Hiroshima,” Berger faces the idea that our culture has “ abandoned” the “ concept of evil. ” (320) Countless pictures seem to be the only thing left of that day, and from Berger’s perspective, the true meaning of that event has been hidden, even though the facts are still in textbooks.

The concept of horrific pictures being taken plays an important role in Berger’s thoughts about Hiroshima, because those pictures are what initially sparked his interest. However, the idea of sharing of graphic pictures is called into question by Susan Sontag in her essay, “ Regarding the Pain of Others,” who points out that war photography should have some form of censorship because of the effect it may have on victims or families who have lost their loved ones. While Berger doesn’t seem to promote graphic photography, it seems that from his point of view, pictures such as these make a reality of what otherwise might just become another page in our history books. “ These paintings [by survivors] were shown on Japanese television. Is it conceivable that the BBC would show these pictures on Channel One at a peak hour? ” (319) He makes a strong point that American television would never show those pictures without “ reference to ‘ political’ and ‘ military’ realities” (319) because it was our country that caused such destruction. Sontag almost reinforces this idea by saying that “ the camera brings the viewer close, too close,” (259) but at the same time contradicts it by implying that war pictures sometimes provide inaccurate information

because of new agetechnology. Cameras and computers today have the ability to enhance the main focus, what the photographer wants you to look at, and blur out other details which may change a picture completely. " The real thing may not be fearsome enough, and therefore needs to be enhanced; or reenacted more convincingly. " (259) This brings out a good point, although cameras used in 1945 wouldn't have that kind of technology, but they can still be edited today.

That being said, a picture can be inaccurate in more ways than one. While the Hiroshima pictures are heartbreaking to look at, Berger fails to address the fact that not all war pictures tell the full story, along with what may have happened before and after the picture was taken, and some may be taken completely out of context. Sontag brings in this idea by talking about a famous picture of a South Vietnamese General shooting a Vietcong suspect, which turned out to be staged. This idea calls Berger's argument into question, because it is unknown which pictures are " real" and which are mainly for ublicity purposes. We don't know what happened before, after, or even what's going on outside the frame on a picture just by looking at it. Only the photographer and the people present at that moment know the whole truth. Although Sontag brings in some point that were missed by Berger, Sontag reinforces Berger's speculation that US television and newspapers only show what the government wants the public to see, and nothing more. She adds that the military promoted " images that illustrated America's absolute military superiority over its enemy. " (260) in the Gulf War in 1991.

This idea really brings the true motives of our nation out, which is really what Berger's entire argument is based off of. He tries to make the US look like bullies, killing innocent people to scare their government so that we look like a strong country that defeats the bad guys and protects its citizens. " It was not a miscalculation, an error, or the result of a situation deteriorating so rapidly that it gets out of hand. " (319) This quote proves that, from Berger's perspective, the US purposely caused such an event, which was preplanned , not a defense mechanism.

While Sontag doesn't specify an opinion about why the US only shows pictures that make our government look good, she does mention that " the use of cameras at the front for nonmilitary purposes have become much stricter as war has become an activity prosecuted with increasingly exact optical devices for tracking the enemy. " (260) This would explain why we don't see many pictures of the war going on right now, even though it's been going on for many years already. Berger aims his focus on Hiroshima alone, while Sontag looks at the big picture of war photography in itself.

Sontag would assumingly agree with Berger about the issue of Hiroshima, how horrifying it was and how those pictures play such a big role. At the same time, I think this would further promote her idea that war photography is sometimes too harsh, even though without seeing those pictures, one might not be able to imagine such horror. However, Sontag might not agree with Berger when he says " the memory of these events should be continually before our eyes. " (320) A lot of pictures should be continually before our eyes, and unfortunately Hiroshima is only an example of events hat would be forgotten without visual aids to remind us. He himself is an

example, not interested in the book on his desk until he opened it and was reminded of such an event. But like Sontag says, “ to display the dead, after all, is what the enemy does. ” (259) In many third world countries, people see death and sickness all the time. Civilians in places like Iraq and Afghanistan probably see death more than anyone, and we, the enemy, are the ones showing it to them. For us, war pictures hit too close to home, especially for families that have loved ones overseas fighting for our country, but what about people that have to witness it firsthand? They don't always have a choice. Berger, who is British, calls his friend from America, the one he talks about in the beginning, “ innocent,” saying that she looks at a “ nuclearholocaustwithout considering its reality. ” (321) But in a way, many Americans do that. We could “ google” many kinds of pictures, graphic or not, whenever we feel like it, but do we really think about what it would be like to be there?

This is the problem with Sontag's idea about war photos not being shown; without them, many Americans would probably be even more naive than they already are. If I told you a bomb was dropped on Japan and many people were killed and burned, you would probably feel sympathy, but you would probably go on with your day, as would a lot of people. But seeing pictures, children burned, dead bodies, that would make it more real, and that's why Berger says we should constantly see things like that. Unfortunately, that can't be publicly shown, especially on television, where everything has to be “ familyoriented. ” There's a downside to both arguments: we can't constantly be reminded of such horrible things like Hiroshima, but we also can't be completely out of the loop. War photography

is a controversial topic, but it's one that will most likely always be part of life. As long as there's wars, there will be people trying to expose the events and realities of it. Works Cited Berger, John " Hiroshima" Fields of Reading, 2010, Bedford/ St. Martin's Sontag, Susan " Regarding the Pain of Others" Fields of Reading, 2010, Bedford/ St. Martin's