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Tim O'Brien, *If I die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1973)

Major Callicles looked like an ex-light-heavyweight champ. He had a head like a flattened 105 round, a thick brown neck, bristling stalks of hair, bloodshot eyes, a disdain for pansies. He was the battalion executive officer – second in command. He bragged that he'd started out as a NCO, thrived on the discipline, and gone on to become an officer, avoiding West Point and doing it the hard way.

Barrel-chested – staves and beer and all – he was a last but defiant champion of single-mingled, hard-boiled militarism. He listed his hates in precise order – moustaches, prostitution, pot, and sideburns. And since all four were either tacitly or explicitly permitted in Vietnam, he harboured a necessarily silent hate for the new, insidious liberality infecting his army.

Moustaches, while authorized by new regulations, were quickly outlawed. It was rumoured he carried a dull and bloody razor, that he used it on even a wisp of overnight hair.

Next was prostitution. It was an all-consuming outrage. A whorehouse flourished at the very foot of LZ Gator, the battalion fire base, and he muttered he would get rid of it.

He pursued pot and sideburns like an FBI agent; he prosecuted violators with the ruthless zeal of Julius Caesar.

'Guts', he would mutter. 'This army really needs guts. GI Joe's turned into a pansy. O'Brien, you show me a soldier with guts, and you can have this job.' He hunched his shoulders, stood stiff-legged, he held a cigarette like a pencil, and turned to look at you out of one eye, scowling and squinting.

Three months after Major Callicles took charge, *Time* and *Newsweek* and every other scrap of paper blowing into Vietnam heralded the My Lai massacre.

The massacre happened in March 1968. That was one year after I'd arrived in Vietnam; over a year and a half before Callicles took over the executive officer's job; long before our battalion had taken over the Pinkville—My Lai area of operations from Lieutenant Calley's Eleventh Brigade. But Major Callicles stuffed the burden of My Lai into his own soul. He lost sleep. He lost interest in pot and prostitutes, and his thick, brown face became lined with red veins haemorrhaging with the pain of My Lai. Like the best defence attorney, he assumed the burden of defending and justifying and denying – all in one broad, contradictory stroke.

At first, he blamed the press: 'Christ, those rags – you don't really believe that crap? Jesus, wake up, O'Brien! You got to learn the economics of this thing. These goddamn slick rags got to sell their crap, right? So they just add together the two big things in this hippie culture: people like scandals and people hate the military, not knowing what's good for them. It's knee jerk. So they look around and choose My Lai 4 – hell, it happened over a year ago, it's dead – and they crank up their yellow journalism machine; they sell a million *Times* and *Newsweeks* and the advertisers kick in and the army's the loser – everybody else is salivating and collecting dollars.'

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40 But for Callicles it was more than an outrage, it was a direct and personal blow. 'Christ, O'Brien, I'm one of hundreds of executive officers in the Nam. This battalion is one of hundreds. And they got to pick on us. There's a billion stinking My Lai 4s, and they put the finger on us.'

45 When Reuters, CBS, ABC, UPI and NBC flew in, Callicles took them into his little office and repeated the same grimacing, one-bloodshot-eye-in-the-face, shotgun argument he perfected with us privately. 'Look, I thought the press was supposed to be *liberal* – *liberal*. Maybe I'm no liberal, but I know something about it. I never went to college, but I can read, and I know the press isn't supposed to try a man in print. That's what we got juries for, you know, they do the trying, it's the law. That's liberal, isn't it? Just be quiet one minute – isn't that what the liberals say? You don't insinuate or manufacture guilt until you're in the courthouse and everyone's got evidence ready and a judge and a jury and a court reporter to take down everything.'

50 A reporter said they were just printing the allegations of other soldiers, former GIs.

'Hell, you don't believe them? Some pipsqueak squeals, and everyone runs to make a national scandal. We're trying to win a war here, and Jesus, what the hell do you think war is? Don't you think some civilians get killed? You ever been to My Lai? Well, I'll tell you, these
55 *civilians* – *you* call them civilians – they kill American GIs. They plant mines and spy an snipe and kill us. Sure, you all print colour pictures of dead little boys, but the live ones – take pictures of the live ones digging holes for mines.'

60 A reporter asked if there isn't a distinction between killing people you know to be the enemy and slaying one hundred people, when no one is shooting and when you can't distinguish the mine-planters from the innocent.

'Now look here, damn it, the distinction is between war and peace', Callicles said. 'This here is war. You know about war? What you do is kill. The bomber pilot fries some civilians – he doesn't see it maybe, but he damn well knows it. Sure, so he flies out and drops his load and flies back, gets a beer, and sees a movie.'

65 'Just answer this: where's the war where civilians come out on top? Show me one. You can't, and the reason is that war's brutal – civilians just suffer through it. They're like unarmed soldiers – they're dumb and they die; they're smart, they run, they hide, then they live.' Callicles pushed the words like moist worms through his teeth.

70 A reporter asked if there isn't a distinction between the unintentional slaying of civilians from the air, when there's no way to discriminate, and the wilful shooting of individual beings, one by one, five yards away, taking aim at a ditch full of unarmed, desperate people.

Callicles snorted and told the reporter to ask the dead people about the distinction.

Maybe the dead people don't see the difference, the reporter said, but what about the law? Shouldn't guilt have something to do with intentionality?

75 'Come on', Callicles said. 'I'll take you on out there. You judge for yourself. This is a war, and My Lai is where the enemy lives – you can see for yourself.'

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Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York, Picador: 2003)

Photographs objectify: they turn an event or a person into something that can be possessed. And photographs are a species of alchemy, for all that they are prized as a transparent account of reality.

5 Often something looks, or is felt to look, “better”, in a photograph. Indeed, it is one of the functions of photography to improve the normal appearance of things (hence, one is always disappointed by a photograph that is not flattering.) Beautifying is one classic operation of the camera, and it tends to bleach out a moral response to what is shown. Uglifying, showing something at its worst, is a more modern function: didactic, it invites an active response. For photographs to accuse, and possibly to alter conduct, they must shock.

10 An example: A few years ago, the public health authorities in Canada, where it had been estimated that smoking kills forty-five thousand people a year, decided to supplement the warning printed on every pack of cigarettes with a shock-photograph – of cancerous lungs, or a stroke-clotted brain, or a damaged heart, or a bloody mouth in acute periodontal distress. A pack with such a picture accompanying the warning about the deleterious effects of smoking
15 would be sixty times more likely to inspire smokers to quit, a research study had somehow calculated, than a pack with only the verbal warning.

Let’s assume this is true. But one might wonder, for how long? Shock can become familiar. Shock can wear off. Even if it doesn’t, one can *not* look. People have the means to defend themselves against what is upsetting – in this instance, unpleasant information for
20 those wishing to continue to smoke. This seems normal, that is, adaptive. As one can become habituated to horror in real life, one can become habituated to the horror of certain images.

Yet there are cases where repeated exposure to what shocks, saddens, appalls does not use up a full-hearted response. Habituation is not automatic, for images (portable, insertable) obey different laws than real life. Representations of the Crucifixion do not become banal to
25 believers, if they really are believers. This is even more true of staged representations. Performances of *Chushingura*, probably the best-known narrative in all of Japanese culture, can be counted on to make a Japanese audience sob when Lord Asano admires the beauty of the cherry blossoms on his way to where he must commit seppuku – sob each time, no matter how often they have followed the story (as a Kabuki or Bunkaru play, as a film); the *ta’ziyah*
30 drama of the betrayal and murder of Imam Hussayn does not cease to bring an Iranian audience to tears no matter how many times they have seen the martyrdom enacted. On the contrary. They weep, in part, because they have seen it many times. People want to weep. Pathos, in the form of a narrative, does not wear out.

But do people want to be horrified? Probably not. Still, there are pictures whose power does not abate, in part because one cannot look at them often. Pictures of the ruin of faces that
35 will always testify to a great iniquity survived, at that cost: the faces of horribly disfigured First World War veterans who survived the inferno of the trenches; the faces melted and thickened with scar tissue of survivors of the American atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki; the faces cleft by machete blows of Tutsi survivors of the genocidal rampage
40 launched by the Hutus in Rwanda – is it correct to say that people get *used* to these?

Indeed, the very notion of atrocity, of war crime, is associated with the expectation of photographic evidence. Such evidence is, usually, something posthumous; the remains, as it

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were—the mounds of skulls in Pol Pot’s Cambodia, the mass graves in Guatemala and El Salvador, Bosnia and Kosovo. And this posthumous reality is often the keenest of summations. As Hannah Arendt pointed out soon after the end of the Second World War, all the photographs and newsreels of the concentration camps are misleading because they show the camps at the moment the Allied forces marched in. What makes the images unbearable—the piles of corpses, the skeletal survivors—was not at all typical for the camps, which, when they were functioning, exterminated their inmates systematically (by gas, not starvation and illness), then immediately cremated them. And photographs echo photographs: it was inevitable that the photographs of emaciated Bosnian prisoners at Omarska, the Serb camp created in Northern Bosnia in 1992, would recall the photographs taken in the Nazi death camps in 1945.

Photographs of atrocity illustrate as well as corroborate. Bypassing disputes about exactly how many were killed (numbers are often inflated at first), the photographs give the indelible sample. The illustrative function of photographs leaves opinions, prejudices, fantasies, misinformation untouched. The information that many fewer Palestinians died in the assault on Jenin than had been claimed by Palestinian officials (as the Israelis had said all along) made much less impact than the photographs of the razed center of the refugee camp. And, of course, atrocities that are not secured in our minds by well-known photographic images, or of which we simply have had very few images – the total extermination of the Herero people in Namibia decreed by the German colonial administration in 1904; the Japanese onslaught in China, notably the massacre of nearly four hundred thousand, and the rape of eighty thousand Chinese in December 1937, the so-called Rape of Nankin; the rape of some one hundred and thirty thousand women and girls (ten thousand of whom committed suicide) by victorious Soviet soldiers unleashed by their commanding officers in Berlin in 1945 – seem more remote. These are memories that few have cared to claim.

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***“The Plain Dealer – Ohio’s largest newspaper, Cleveland,
Thursday, November 20, 1969”***

*(Frontpage): “First photos of Viet Mass Slaying” - “Cameraman
Saw GIs Slay 100 Villagers”*

