

UWP Instructor Application 2010-2011

Sample Student Draft

Directions: Imagine that you are teaching a class in academic writing for first-year college students. In your class, drafts are not graded. Instead, you give students feedback and allow them to revise their essays before submitting them for grades. In response to your first essay assignment (given below), you have received the following draft from Jane X., one of your students. Write a brief end comment (250 words max.) in which you offer advice to Jane about how she might revise his essay. You do not need to submit a marked version of the sample student paper itself. We will be considering only your end comment.

Assignment: Write a 1500-2000 word essay in which you use an article such as Susan Sontag's "Looking at War" as a theoretical lens to analyze and interpret a text of your choosing.

[see below]

Jane X
University Writing

Adjusting the Lens

In her article, “Looking at War: Photography’s View of Devastation and Death,” Susan Sontag argues that as realistic as war photographs *seem*—and, she states, they are the most realistic representations we can achieve—they are nevertheless not all-telling, due in part to the fact that a photo tells the viewer little without contextual information. Sontag’s concept of the importance of contextual information comes into play when, for instance, two different warfare related photographs are examined—just how important is contextual information in understanding the meaning, effect, and implications of a war photograph? What is the difference between viewing a war photograph with, and without, historical knowledge? And while viewing a war photograph purely for its ascetics certainly elicits an emotional response, how much more depth do human reactions gain when learning the history behind an image?

In order to answer these questions, the focus will be narrowed on two war photographs—László Karsai’s “Dead Man at Auschwitz” and Signal Corps U.S. Army’s “Dead Nazi.” Upon first glance, these two images seem quite similar to each other, as each is a black and white photograph depicting a man who has died in a brutal fashion. In both cases, the photo initially invokes feelings of pain and despondency. Nevertheless, the meaning of these images changes dramatically when the viewer becomes aware of the context, which in these cases includes, but is not limited to, the pertinent series of historical events, and the consequences of these actions. The knowledge of such

information fundamentally alters a viewer's emotional reaction to both photographs in that the devastation in one of the pictures immediately seems much less painful, while the tragedy in the other image becomes more pronounced than it initially had been.

Perhaps the most unique element of a photograph, and particularly a wartime photograph, and one that distinguishes it from all other realms of art, is its ability to serve as both a work of art and as a historical document. Sontag writes of a “dual power” implicit in photography: the power to “generate documents and to create works of visual art.” (94) In light of this statement, it is our duty as responsible spectators not to fail to neglect either one of these elements, historical or artistic, when looking at a photograph. Admittedly, in viewing photography there is something to be said for approaching the work without preconceived notions as to what the artist's intentions were. Specifically, the work of art may prove most meaningful or appropriate if a viewer observes the work in the context of today's society, rather than viewing it in its historical context, which may preclude its applicability to the present by assigning it to a bygone era. Moreover, there is a definite value in viewing suffering without context—in removing context the universality of suffering during wartime can be more easily captured by an audience. In some capacity, context can be regarded as insignificant because the context of a situation depicting suffering should not truly matter—the only thing that should be focused on, it can be argued, is the nature of the suffering, itself. However, in approaching László Karsai's “Dead Man at Auschwitz” and Signal Corps U.S. Army's “Dead Nazi” from a purely ascetic standpoint, the viewer has a similar reaction to both images—both pieces of work invoke feelings of suffering, tragedy and pain. While this reaction is meaningful, it also limited. Wartime photos are unique from other forms of art because these photos

are not merely meant to be visually pleasing, they are also meant to capture a moment in time precisely, thus becoming a way to visually document wars throughout history. If a wartime photograph is viewed only in an ascetic light, much of the meaning behind the image is lost and while most photos, to some extent, can be left to interpretation, a wartime photo is meant to depict the pain and tragedy that *actually* occurred.

The vast majority of wartime photographs are profoundly disturbing to look at, and László Karsai's "Dead Man at Auschwitz" is no exception. In "Dead Man at Auschwitz," the viewer sees a man lying on the snow-covered ground. His legs and arms are thin, and, other than a small piece of white cloth covering the front of his torso, he is naked. His face is turned toward the camera so that the observer can plainly see the pained expression on his sunken face. His brows are furrowed, his mouth slightly ajar, and it is clear that he has died a premature and painful death. Moreover, the onlooker can hardly see any of the man's surroundings, with the only exceptions being a concrete-looking patch under his body where the snow has cleared, the bottom of a staircase in the upper right corner of the photo, and a hint of a wall in the upper left hand corner.

The photograph "Dead Nazi" is similar in its subject matter, but different in its details, to Karsai's tragic image. Again, the observer views a dead man sprawled out on a barren ground, with nothing else in the frame that reveals his surroundings. The man was fully clothed at the time of his death (although his shirt is raised so that his stomach is exposed to the onlooker). In addition, his body seems as if it has been somewhat mutilated; the face seems swollen and bruised, and his right arm is twisted behind his back so that the onlooker can only see from his shoulder down to his elbow. Lastly, the ground underneath the body is not concrete, but rather a mixture of dirt and rocks—there

is no indication in this image as to whether the man has died close to a building, as was obvious in Karsai's image.

In both cases it is tempting to make assumptions as to the causes of the men's death. In Karsai's photo it is difficult even to speculate how this man has died, as he has no remnants on his body or in his surroundings that would point toward the cause of death. In the image of a "Dead Nazi," on the other hand, it is easier to conjecture a cause of death, as perhaps the "Dead Nazi" died from a brutal beating. Yet it is impossible to know precisely how he died merely by viewing this photo, a point Sontag draws upon in her argument. As she says, "one of the most unforgettable images of the war in Bosnia...[was] a Serb militiaman casually kicking a dying Muslim woman in the head." (95) She then cites John Kifner's comment that this particular photo "tells you everything you need to know," an argument with which Sontag strongly disagrees: "But of course it doesn't tell us everything we need to know." (95) In both "A Dead Man at Auschwitz" and "Dead Nazi," the spectator is capable of a basic emotional response to the photos. After the initial horror of seeing a dead body has begun to subside, however, there is a lack of depth with respect to the pictures without knowing the history behind the images because a photo "doesn't tell us everything we need to know." (94) Ultimately, photos provide the onlooker with a "what"—in these instances, death—but it cannot answer *why* these people died, nor can it fully inform a spectator without historical context.

In order to truly understand the meaning of these two photographs, it is critical to understand the context and history of the conflicting ideologies that led to the war that resulted in these pictured dead bodies. Despite the similar appearances of the

photographs on the surface, with the aid of context we learn that “Dead Nazi” depicts, as its title suggests, a Nazi who had been killed by American soldiers in 1945 following the raid of Ohrdurf Forced Labor Camp, a sub camp of Buchenwald Concentration Camp, in Weimar, Germany. Knowledge of this information reminds the viewer that the raid of Ohrdurf in Germany delivered one of the final blows in a monumentally important, difficult, and bloody struggle against Nazism and a mass murderer, Hitler. The picture of a murdered Nazi therefore becomes symbolic not only of tragedy, but also, and even primarily depicts something that was done out of necessity in order to overthrow Hitler. The historical context of “Dead Nazi” makes us understand the necessity of this man’s death: a Nazi, who at the least was complacent with the mass murder of millions of innocent people and at the most was a mass murderer himself, lies dead in this image.

Conversely, the photo “Dead Man at Auschwitz” portrays a presumably Jewish victim of the Auschwitz Concentration Camp in the southern part of Poland. A viewer who understands the devastation and horrors that occurred at Auschwitz might imagine that this man, who lacks any obvious marks as to the cause of his death, died from starvation or exposure to the cold—relatively common fates in a concentration camp for those lucky enough to avoid the gas chambers or execution. Thus, this image becomes representative of *immense* tragedy, as Jews, such as the man depicted, were the victims of a systematical attempt to completely annihilate their entire population. In looking at “Dead Man at Auschwitz,” the spectator is given a window into the past through the lens of a camera: in this case, the spectator can see into the devastation that the Holocaust, a merciless destroyer of life, caused. Simply put, knowing the history behind the photo makes the image even more poignant. If one were to merely look at the image, yet never

seek its historical background, the impact of Karsai's work would not be nearly as monumental. Thus, Sontag's view that a picture alone "doesn't tell us everything we need to know" is instrumental here; once again, in gaining an understanding of the history behind each one of these images, the meaning of each photo vastly changes: one becomes a symbol of a necessary killing, while the other becomes an even more profound image of devastation.

Two photographs that initially conveyed individual tragedy can thus, with contextual information, become symbols of justice or of arguably one of the greatest tragedies in the history of the modern humanity. Ultimately, however, as Sontag notes, a photograph cannot convey the actual experience of war, regardless of how vivid it is and how powerful a reaction it elicits from its viewer. Yet, an image is able to convey so much more information when the viewer possesses the requisite knowledge to put a photo in its proper context. Thus, even if we cannot *re-create* the experience, we can learn from it so that we take away its many lessons. It is in this sense that we truly value from, even need, war images, so that we can begin to understand that experience, always attempting to view it through the contextual lens that frames the picture we are studying.