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On the Arts: Images that Burn

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The photograph shows a small, skeletal figure with matted dark hair waiting in the desert for donated food he will not receive. The child's hands are folded over a boxy, dusty jacket, and his eyes are downcast, his jaw clenched to bulging.

His profile memorializes the eternal, cyclical nature of war. He suffers from it, burns with it.

I still have this photograph, taken by Tom Pennington of the Fort Worth Star-Telegram a year and a half ago, after U.S.-led forces toppled the Taliban in Afghanistan. The boy is Naqeed Ullah, a 12-year-old orphan.

Just before U.S. and British troops bombed Iraq, I pinned up the photograph of Naqeed at my desk. I expected fresh images of pain from this war, too, and I got them: A young woman's crumpled face after 17 of her neighbors had been killed in a bombing. Captured soldiers. An ancient city aflame. An Iraqi girl lying in the dirt after Kurds forced her family from their home. The officials say this war in Iraq is over. The images say otherwise.

Photography, more than any other art form, asks viewers to invest in the experience that created its images. Often, we do not want to see or understand this pain — the “Why should I feel bad over my morning coffee?” argument — and we turn the page. We consider the horrors through what Susan Sontag calls “savage torpor” — through the lens of news-as-entertainment or the perpetual shock of naivete.

Graphic images have provoked us since the Civil War, when we saw the photograph of dead Union soldiers at Gettysburg. Since then, we have seen a naked, screaming South Vietnamese girl who had torn off her clothes because her skin was being burned off by the napalm that South Vietnamese troops mistakenly dropped on her pagoda. We have seen the pistol-to-head execution of a young Viet Cong officer by a South Vietnamese general. The dead babies at My Lai. The charred skeleton of an Iraqi soldier in a burned-out truck during the Persian Gulf War.

And, in late 2001, we saw “Taliban Execution,” a series of images by Tyler Hicks, one of the finest emerging war photographers today. Hicks, a former staff photographer for the Wilmington Star-News who now works for The New York Times, traveled with the Afghan soldiers known as the Northern Alliance as they swept through Afghanistan after the U.S. bombing. The story is told in seven frames: Northern Alliance soldiers discover a wounded and bleeding Taliban soldier hiding in a ditch. They tower over him as he pleads for his life and force him onto a dirt road. The last frame shows the man, his pants dragged to his feet, being fired on by three Northern Alliance soldiers.

Yet even as the soldiers shoot the dying man in the dirt, you sense that this story is not over. It

contains in its stillness a tension and velocity that say war is never over. We know that emotionally and intellectually investing in these images cannot stop war. So why not turn the page? How do you see and understand, especially in a high-tech visual society that regularly glazes over portrayals of violence and suffering?

“You want to show the commonality of human nature in times of war,” says Chris Hondros, a photojournalist with Getty Images. “Any art is only a shadow of the actual emotion of its reality.”

Hondros, who grew up in Fayetteville, has documented wars in Kosovo, Israel, Kashmir, Sierra Leone and now Iraq. Last month, he had to outrun Iraqi troops firing 50-caliber machine guns at him and two other photographers. He abandoned his car and his supplies, but he saved his camera.

A couple of weeks ago, he found the story of Khudair Al-Amiri and his son, Ali Al-Amiri. The father had fled his hometown of Qal’at Sukkar after the first Persian Gulf War and returned for the first time this year as a translator for the U.S. Marines. In the photo, the son, who has not seen his father in more than a decade, is crying and resting his head on his father’s chest. The father’s eyes are watering, and he is covering his mouth with a cloth.

This is when a violent or sad image becomes an artistic truth — when it becomes meaningful and accessible. We can see ourselves in the image. In fractured times, people still want to eat a familiar dinner with their families, walk through their neighborhoods, go to school, go to work. War shatters the normalcy. They cannot eat. They walk past their burning homes and cry. They cannot work. They want revenge and mercy.

The images tell us the real story about war — that suffering and loss are on both sides, and that suffering often breeds anger and then more suffering and loss. Considering this in the context of its humanity — the woman in her broken neighborhood, the bleeding man pleading for his life, the homeless child in the red dress crouched in the dirt — makes it feel universal.

We see. We understand. And that is enough.

The image of Naqeed Ullah helped me understand a troubling story my father told me two decades ago.

My father, who had lived through two wars as a child in rural Greece, liked to substitute bedtime stories about princes and fantastical kingdoms with stories about his real-life experiences in an orphanage in the Peloponnese during Greece’s 1944-49 civil war. The stories were grim. One unnerved me for years. Once, he and a few boys were playing soccer in a field next to the orphanage. They kicked the ball too far and found the decapitated, decomposing body of an executed man.

Understand that the boys had grown used to dead bodies. Dead bodies were everywhere, especially around impoverished areas.

But my father never forgot how one of the boys kicked the dead man’s head like a soccer ball and laughed.

So many died of hunger and illness in that place, he told me. That boy blamed the war for the trap of his life, and he hated what the dead man represented. The boy, who was as hungry and heartbroken as the rest of the orphans, became something heartless.

My father had to turn away because he was afraid he would become heartless, too. Yet he stayed,

and sometimes he turned his head back to watch.

I didn't really understand what my father meant until I saw the photograph of Naqeed.

My father's eyes still held his childhood pain. He had seen that war can transform villain to victim, victim to villain, in a single brutal stroke.

I imagined my father as a child, as skeletal and hopeless as Naqeed. I imagined my father's friend filled with the anger brimming in Naqeed's downcast eyes. I saw all of them suffering from war, and burning with it.

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