

The Agony and the Artifice

Fred Ritchin

From Debi Cornwall, *Welcome to Camp America: Inside Guantánamo Bay* (Radius Books, 2017)

“Once upon a time there were the mass media, and they were wicked, of course, and there was a guilty party. Then there were the virtuous voices that accused the criminals. And Art (ah, what luck!) offered alternatives, for those who were not prisoners of the mass media.

“Well, it's all over. We have to start again from the beginning, asking one another what's going on.”

—Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyper Reality*, 1986

“The world seems to be divided today between those horrified to see history repeat itself and those who eagerly await its horrors.”

—Charles Simic, “Expendable America,” *New York Review of Books*, November 19, 2016

In Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, the novel's protagonist and his companion, Murray, with a habit of scrutinizing cereal boxes for semiotic clues, drive into the countryside. Passing five signs that reference “The Most Photographed Barn in America,” they arrive at a makeshift lot with 40 cars and a tour bus already parked. They have also arrived into a photographic frenzy: “All the people had cameras; some had tripods, telephoto lenses, filter kits. A man in a booth sold postcards and slides—pictures of the barn taken from the elevated spot.”

But there is also a massive disconnect, as Murray points out: “No one sees the barn.... Once you've seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn.” What, then, are the people doing? “They are taking pictures of taking pictures.” Murray's reflections were published some three decades ago, well before the invention of the cell-phone camera, social media and the proliferation of billions of digital images online, but only five years after the postmodern artist Cindy Sherman had her first major New York show of faked “film stills” and the actor Ronald Reagan was elected president.

In his curious way Murray asked essential questions of a society celebrating the power of the image but simultaneously using it to obfuscate and forget: “What was the barn like before it was photographed?... What did it look like, how was it different from other barns, how was it similar to other barns?” And somewhat coyly, Murray concludes: “‘We can't answer these questions because we've read the signs, seen the people snapping the pictures. We can't get outside the aura. We're part of the aura. We're here, we're now.’ He seemed immensely pleased by this.”

The aura, if anything, has expanded, and the signs today (from “crooked Hillary” to a “basket of deplorables”) have proliferated to a state of near omnipresence. What is a serious photographer, concerned with the issues and not their branding or spin, to do? Can one see the barn anew? Or, more importantly, can one actually see war? What was war like before it was photographed? Was it always a spectacle of vivid bombings and broken bodies, an orchestrated activity made to look like a fatal sport, a quasi-religious morality play? Did it ever inhabit a Newtonian universe of cause and effect, including the economic and political, that provided even a bit of clarity as to how to resolve or even avoid it? Does image need war as much as war now seems to require image? Would conflicts be easier to appreciate and understand, and even settle, if photographers stayed home?

In 1985, the same year that *White Noise* was published, critic Neil Postman compared the dystopia of George Orwell's *1984* with Aldous Huxley's 1932 novel, *Brave New World*. “What Orwell feared were those who would ban books,” says Postman. “What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one. Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism.” They both seem to have been correct.

In an earlier era, for example, a black-and-white photograph of a young member of the Vietcong being marched

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into the street and summarily executed in Saigon, or another four years later of a naked young girl with her skin burning from napalm, inspired much soul-searching as to both the wisdom and the morality of the US intervention in Vietnam. In 1969, the year after Eddie Adams's photograph of the sidewalk execution, newly elected president Richard Nixon's administration did order significant U.S. troop reductions and, in 1973, the year after Nick Ut's harrowing image of the young girl appeared, U.S. troops would leave Vietnam. Two years later the war ended.

While it is of course impossible to position these troop withdrawals in the logic of cause and effect, there was a time when the photographic image might help trigger for some a hardening of previous views, while for others it might lead to a reconsideration of support for a cause or a passionate interest in another. The photograph, conceived of as a quasi-mechanical record of visible reality, could be useful as a reference point that served to help stimulate and position an ensuing debate. Was the U.S. actually fighting for democracy or was the goal more of a corporate takeover? Was the "domino theory" warning of Chinese domination valid? Did the ends justify the means? The photograph managed, in many cases, both to circumvent a government's official position and to challenge it.

And photographs did concern those who later assumed power. During the first Persian Gulf War, fifteen years later, in an effort to avoid what President George H. W. Bush called "another Vietnam," photographers were kept off the battlefield. They were sidelined for televised simulations narrated by various on-air consultants as well as for the occasional image from a camera mounted on a "smart" bomb on its way to its target. Photographs that directly addressed the consequences of the violence were negated in the orchestrated "image war" that enveloped the conflict. For example, pictures of a bunker destroyed in central Baghdad by an American missile were quickly obfuscated by a cloud of questions meant to nullify their impact: Were the Iraqi dead civilians or soldiers? Who was at fault? Was it all staged? As a 1991 front-page headline in the *Los Angeles Times* proclaimed, "Images of Death Could Produce Tilt to Baghdad." The images, more than the people, became of concern.

While these restrictive policies were somewhat lifted for the second Gulf War, there was still a powerful strategy in place to mitigate any potential fallout: photographers were required to be "embedded" with troops, and had to sign contracts stipulating under what circumstances photographs could be published. Even the flag-draped coffins containing the bodies of American soldiers returning home were placed off limits for photographers. The most revealing photographs to emerge from that conflict, not entirely surprisingly, were those made by the soldiers themselves who were torturing inmates at the Abu Ghraib prison. While the professionals had been muffled, concerned with contracts and the parameters of publication, the soldiers became, unintentionally, those with a much more visceral, compelling, raw and horrific story to tell.

And now, in an era in which billions of images are uploaded daily with no equivalent of a front page to focus attention, in an environment of a generalized skepticism about media, the credibility of the photograph founders. Now it is perceived as more of a signifier of opinion than of the facts, and any evidence it purports to show is often immediately contested and disparaged. Rather than the old bromide "the camera never lies" from the mechanical era, the referents in the image are thought of as what might be called "desirents," a projection onto reality of a particular worldview.

Now the photographs and videos of people on the verge of being slaughtered may elicit little in terms of a pragmatic response, as the *New York Times's* architecture critic, Michael Kimmelman, recently commented in an anguished critic's notebook entitled "Aleppo's Faces Beckon to Us." He quotes German Chancellor Angela Merkel as saying, "When a free-trade agreement with the U.S.A. drives hundreds of thousands of people to the streets, but such horrible bombings as in Aleppo do not trigger any protest, then something is not right." Above Kimmelman's front-page piece, the *Times* published four iconic images of children, two from previous eras: Nick Ut's photograph of nine-year-old Kim Phúc being napalmed in Vietnam, and Kevin Carter's of a famished child in the Sudan being menaced by a vulture; as well as two recent photographs of Syrian children, one by Mahmoud Raslan of five-year-old Omran Daqneesh, bloodied and stunned in an ambulance, and another by Nilüfer Demir of Aylan Kurdi's prone

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body after he had drowned while attempting to flee Syria with his family. Kimmelman ends his anguished reflection haunted by the profound disconnect between the horror of the imagery and society's disregard. Having "done nothing to help" when confronted with these images, he suggests, "[t]he very least we should do is look back."

In this environment of too many images accomplishing too little, are there any alternative strategies that allow a greater understanding and encourage a constructive response? This is the challenge of any serious social documentary photographer working today. In the case of Guantánamo Bay, how does one depict a notorious prison operated mostly in secret by Americans concerned with the possible guilt of the inmates in their care but who are themselves functioning largely outside the United States legal system? How does one go beyond the image signifiers of barbed wire and prisoners in orange jumpsuits (later imitated by ISIS as they beheaded foreigners)? How does one deal with all of those made anonymous but collectively thought of as the "other," widely attributed to the enemy and to evil, their presumption of innocence bypassed? How does one comprehend the relationship between the various forms of nearly medieval torture practiced and the resortlike atmosphere on the same tropical island?

More specifically, is it possible to deconstruct a marketing campaign that has a gift shop branding the Guantánamo experience with T-shirts stating "IT DON'T GITMO BETTER THAN THIS" or another, featuring a menacing guard tower, stating "The Taliban Towers at Guantanamo Bay, the Caribbean's Newest 5-star Resort"? Or the bobblehead figure for sale of Fidel Castro on a boom box inscribed, "Rockin' in Fidel's Backyard"? Is there a possible comparison to be made to the "Arbeit Macht Frei" (Work Makes You Free) sign greeting inmates of a World War II concentration camp, or is even mentioning it grounds for accusations of treason against America, or is it the American brand?

Not only as a photographer but as a person, how does one deal with the waterboarding that left men drowning, the calculus of throwing them off walls from different angles, the aggressive force-feeding of those on hunger strikes, and the "frequent flyer" technique by which men and their belongings were moved from one cell to another every couple of hours to destabilize them and prevent them from sleeping? And then what of the nearly obscene juxtaposition of the white sands and the sea, the fishing trips and windsurfing, the cinema, eighteen-hole golf course and the bowling alley, McDonald's and the KFC, all of which are available to America's 1.5 million service personnel worldwide and to Guantánamo's workers?

The boundaries between heaven and hell seem to have been purposefully compromised to camouflage the legal and moral problematics of the extra-judicial confinement of hundreds of men. President Obama regretted not having closed the prison on his first day in office, while former Vice President Dick Cheney asserted that the prisoners were living in resortlike conditions: "They're living in the tropics. They're well fed. They've got everything they could possibly want. There isn't any other nation in the world that would treat people who were determined to kill Americans the way we're treating these people."

It is difficult to forget President George W. Bush telling Americans to go shopping after the attacks of September 11, his redefinition of the citizen as consumer becoming somehow consonant with the Guantánamo gift shop. And more recently we remember Donald Trump at a campaign rally in Sparks, Nevada, saying: "This morning, I watched President Obama talking about Gitmo, right, Guantánamo Bay, which by the way, which by the way, we are keeping open. Which we are keeping open ... and we're gonna load it up with some bad dudes, believe me, we're gonna load it up." One can only wait to see if the former reality television star was serious, or kidding, will forget about it, or can get away with it.

In *Welcome to Camp America* Debi Cornwall implicitly references Jeremy Bentham's panopticon, structured to enable and conceal the all-seeing and oppressive prison guard, but much more explicitly is in the arena of DeLillo's "Most Photographed Barn," the unseeing observer. Deconstructing the visible foreground is as important to Cornwall as the more traditional documentary strategy of attempting to uncover that which has been concealed in

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the background. In *Welcome to Camp America* the plush turkey-vulture gift shop souvenir with “Guantánamo Bay Cuba” written on its chest is juxtaposed with the process by which men’s souls are preyed upon just next door, delineating the contradiction between tourism and torture. Similarly, the vivid photograph of the four white metal reclining lawn chairs lined up, a green palm tree seeming to sway behind them in front of a blue sky with wispy white clouds, has its resemblance to paradise subverted by a sign on the fence announcing, “In case of emergency call 911.” The text that follows it destabilizes the image further: “That the segregation cells consist of stamped steel completely around each cell, and you cannot see in or out of the cell except for a small ‘beanhole,’ where food is given to the detainee. The segregation cell was very dark, with only a small light at the upper corner of the cell which gave off the same kind of light as a fading flashlight. The floor of the segregation cell was also made of steel.”

It may be the photograph of the three soldiers in camouflage gear who are shown mannequinlike and faceless from behind, standing at the island’s edge, looking towards the blues of the sea and sky in front of them, that is the book’s most emblematic. The image evokes a sense of the impact of the system on human beings, turning them mechanical and robotic while surrounded by the idyllic and the make-believe. It also serves to underline the bleakness of the environmental portraits that follow, of former prisoners scattered throughout the world, also photographed from the back, their faces concealed out of fear for their safety in whichever country agreed to accept them, this time without any blue sea framing them. Their facelessness is, of course, a sign of empathy on the part of the photographer who withholds their identities so that they might find another one less compromised; perhaps we are meant to think the same of these soldiers.

For some soldiers, however, being at Gitmo is pleasurable, like the military escort who was heard to remark, “Gitmo is the best posting a soldier could have. There’s so much fun to be had here!” For others it has been a black hole, a descent into the darkest part of the human psyche, the torture techniques described here in unclassified documents with headings that are both clinical and terrifying: “Nudity,” “Dietary manipulation,” “Insult slap.” Limning the ugly disconnect between the surface allure and the systemic cruelty, Cornwall also tries to remind us of the legacy of this experience in the lives of the men whose destinies have been so brutally altered. In a repetitive, painfully ironic refrain, next to nearly all the portraits of the former prisoners identified only by their first names, the text reads, “Charges never filed.”

And she does manage to convey some of the atmosphere within the prison. Cornwall quotes one American soldier who was masquerading as a prisoner on a training drill in a cell: “I tried to get on my stomach so that I could be compliant,” said the soldier, “and so their pressure and aggression would lessen. However the grabbing, bending and twisting only intensified. It never lessened.” He continues: “I uttered the code word ‘Red’ again and when I did that, the individual behind me slammed my head down against the steel floor. I was trying to be as limp and compliant as possible, but it was not working.” Afterwards, when he asked for a video of the violation that is typically made for training purposes, he found that it had been erased.

Release as well, it turns out, can be problematic, and refuge illusory. Hamza, identified as a Tunisian man now living in exile in Slovakia after having been imprisoned for almost thirteen years (despite charges never having been filed), had one such experience: “Special Forces officers broke down his door, shot him with rubber bullets, and arrested him.” Why? “He had not left his apartment in five days, they explained.”

How then is a reader to respond? In *Welcome to Camp America* we cannot look back at the faces that look at us, as Kimmelman pleaded in the *New York Times*, because their faces are for the most part concealed. But, as Kimmelman also pointed out and Cornwall evidently agrees, empathy alone is not a sufficient response. In *Welcome to Camp America* we are urged instead to confront a system responsible for moral breakdown and inhuman punishment, depriving people of their fundamental right to a fair trial while also rationalizing torture. The reader is urged as well to confront the workings of a society, barely concealed behind the branding exercise of T-shirts, coffee mugs and plush souvenirs, that condones this. And, despite a prevailing disregard for the factual and

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the logical, *Welcome to Camp America* manages to deconstruct war's fog as well as its opaque blue skies. Like a legal brief, it reconnects images to the realities from which they have been unmoored.

Last century's celebrated war photographer Robert Capa is well-known for his oft-quoted statement extolling empathy: "If your pictures aren't good enough, you aren't close enough." *Welcome to Camp America* argues persuasively for another strategy—do not neglect the effects of conflict, but most of all work to expose the system that is responsible for the unbearable and unnecessary pain.

"The most photographed barn in America" can be seen.