

Moral (Dis)ambiguities in Encountering the Photographed Face and the Possibility of Ethical Engagement

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Abstract: In a world saturated with visual imagery, where suffering is often aestheticized and consumed at a distance, the ethical status of the photographic image becomes deeply contested. Can a photograph, particularly one depicting poverty, violence, or historical trauma, still bear the ethical weight of the face, as Emmanuel Levinas conceives it? Or does it inevitably reduce the Other to a consumable object, turning human pain into spectacle? In this paper, I aim to explore the possibility of ethical engagement in photography through Levinas' philosophy of the *face* and the *Other*. While Levinas insists that the face confronts us with an infinite ethical demand that resists totalization, the photographic image introduces mediation and permanence, raising the risk of objectification. I, however, argue that certain images, especially those that resist aesthetic closure or sentimental appeal, can operate as asymmetrical encounters. These are not images that offer clarity or resolution, but ones that expose the viewer to an unsettling trace of alterity. To further elaborate my arguments, the discussion is structured around four main sections. First, I present a brief overview of

photography's theory and history through Benjamin, Barthes, and Sontag. Second, a discussion of Levinas' notion of the face of the Other as a framework for ethical responsibility is made. Third, I explore the ways photography might allow genuine ethical engagement rather than reduce subjects to spectacle. Finally, I attempt a turn toward an ethics of response and a mode of *responsive seeing*, i.e., a way of looking that is reflexive, situated, and vulnerable to being ethically implicated. Ultimately, the photograph is reframed not as a transparent window onto suffering, but as a threshold of ethical relation: where the image, under certain conditions, may still preserve the demand of the Other, calling the viewer not to mastery, but to responsibility.

Keywords: Levinas, asymmetrical encounters, photographic image, responsive seeing

INTRODUCTION

Photography is a strange practice. It arrests time yet claims to show life: one is confronted with their (im)mortality as a photograph renders presence through absence, testimony through silence. A photograph is not the thing itself, but neither is it a mere image: it is a trace, a spectral residue, the echo of a moment whose living breath has long since dissipated. Roland Barthes once described the photograph as a “that-has-been,” a wound opened by time, revealing both the certainty of presence and the certainty of loss.¹ Yet beyond these ontological paradoxes lies a deeper, more urgent question: whether or not photography can ethically engage us? This is no small inquiry in a world flooded with images of human suffering: war, exile, poverty, injustice, *inter alia*. The image offers us access, but at a distance.² We scroll, we view, we feel, perhaps even weep. But are we, as viewers, truly addressed by the image? Does the photographed face of the Other still speak, still accuse, still command? Or has the camera, in freezing the face, quieted its cry?

Susan Sontag famously warned that “to photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a relation with the world that feels like knowledge—and therefore power.”³ “To collect photographs,” she writes, is “to collect the world,”⁴ a gesture that risks turning lived realities into consumable fragments. Photography, in this view, is complicit in a broader regime of control: to frame is to isolate, to capture is to reduce. The image becomes a trophy, a spectacle, a substitute for ethical action. Sontag’s suspicion underscores the central tension of this paper: whether the camera, which so easily aligns with

¹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Macmillan, 1981), 115.

² Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, trans. by Rela Mazali and Ruvik Danieli (New York: Zone Books, 2008), 14-15.

³ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1977), 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

mastery, might still be used, against its grain, to disclose the vulnerability of the Other, and to awaken not power, but responsibility.

In his ethics of alterity, Emmanuel Levinas insists that the face of the Other is not an object among objects nor simply a visage.⁵ It is an eruption, an event that interrupts the self, exceeding comprehension, demanding response.⁶ The face is not merely seen; it is *encountered*. Yet, as Sontag pointed out, photography, by its very nature, introduces mediation: it fixes, frames, aestheticizes.⁷ It risks transforming the infinite alterity of the Other into a closed composition, a captured moment to be possessed and interpreted. The danger, then, is that the photograph may collapse the ethical into the aesthetic, substituting feeling for obligation, sentiment for responsibility.⁸

And yet: not all images console. Not all images resolve. There are photographs that resist our gaze: images that disturb rather than explain, that fracture meaning rather than unify it. These are not the images that offer clarity or narrative, but those that trouble the viewer, staging what Ariella Azoulay calls a “civil contract” between the photographed, the photographer, and the spectator: a triangulated field of responsibility that does not end with the shutter click.⁹

In this paper, then, I seek to reimagine the photograph not as a passive record or as a window onto suffering, but as a threshold, a liminal space where the ethical demand of the Other might still shimmer through, that despite its mediation, photography can become a site of ethical

⁵ Levinas remarked: “The face is a fundamental event. Among the many modes of approach and diverse ways of relating to being, the action of the face is special and, for this reason it is very difficult to give it an exact phenomenological description. The phenomenology of the face is very often negative.” See Emmanuel Levinas, “The Paradox of Morality: an interview with Emmanuel Levinas,” in *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*, trans. by Andrew Benjamin and Tamra Wright, ed. by Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), 168.

⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Boston: Martinus Nijhoff, 1979), 66.

⁷ Sontag, *On Photography*, 8.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 11-13.

⁹ Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, 16-17, 20.

relation. To further elaborate my arguments, the discussion is organized into four main parts. I begin with a brief overview of the history and theory of photography, turning to the writings of Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, and Susan Sontag, whose reflections reveal both the promises and paradoxes of the photographic medium. I then turn to Emmanuel Levinas' notion of the face of the Other, which grounds the discussion in an ethics that resists reduction to representation or possession. Building on these foundations, the third section considers the possibility of ethical engagement in photography, asking how certain images might resist becoming mere commodities and instead allow us to perceive the humanity of those they portray. Finally, I turn to the idea of an ethics of response, proposing a mode of *responsive seeing* that is not passive but responsive: a way of looking that remains reflexive, contextually aware, and open in its vulnerability. Such seeing does not master the image but is undone by it, implicated in it. The photograph, under these fragile conditions, becomes a trace not of what is gone, but of what is still asking: what will you do now that you have seen?

A BRIEF HISTORY AND THEORY OF PHOTOGRAPHY: FROM BENJAMIN, BARTHES, TO SONTAG

Before exploring the ethical implications of photography, it is essential to first ground the discussion in a brief theoretical and historical account of the medium. Liz Wells noted that “there is no single history of photography.”¹⁰ Rather, there are braided histories that unfold along uneven temporal, geographic, and political lines.¹¹ From its inception in the 1830s, the medium has served divergent purposes: a bourgeois pastime, a scientific instrument, a colonial technology of surveillance, a tool of emancipation, and a form of artistic experiment. Any narrative that privileges one of these trajectories occludes the others. John Tagg

¹⁰ Liz Wells, *Photography: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 13.

¹¹ Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, 20.

reminds us that early photographic archives were inseparable from state power and disciplinary regimes, making “the burden of representation” also a burden of control.¹² Allan Sekula, writing in a similar vein, describes the nineteenth-century photographic portrait as a hinge between the scientific catalog and the sentimental keepsake, revealing how the camera straddled social regulation and personal memory.¹³ Yet, photography also became, as Ariella Azoulay argues, a civil space in which those photographed, those photographing, and those viewing could renegotiate political relations, however precariously.¹⁴ These overlapping histories complicate any attempt to treat the photograph as a neutral window on reality. They show instead a medium constituted by competing claims: evidentiary and aesthetic, colonial and anticolonial, disciplinary and emancipatory. Understanding this multiplicity is essential if we are to assess photography’s ethical possibilities, for the force of any single image is always inflected by the contested histories that have shaped how photographs are produced, circulated, and seen.

By the 20th century, photography entered modernity with a philosophical tension as it promised evidence yet trafficked in appearance, offering an image that was both a guarantee and a detour. Walter Benjamin first captured this ambivalence when he described mechanical reproduction as a force that dissolves the “aura” of the unique work of art.¹⁵ The camera, he argued, liberates the image from ritual distance, placing it in the hands, and the newspapers, of the multitude.¹⁶ The gain is democratic: photographs make hidden realities legible and

¹² John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021), 63.

¹³ Allan Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” in *The Body*, 1st ed., ed. by Mariam Fraser and Monica Greco (London: Routledge, 2020), 163-166.

¹⁴ Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, 14.

¹⁵ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zohn, ed. by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 4-5.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

expose what Benjamin called the “optical unconscious.”¹⁷ The loss, however, is ontological: once detached from its singular here-and-now, the image drifts, available to spectacle or commodification.

Roland Barthes, by the middle of the 20th century, approaches photography not as a technical apparatus nor as a historical archive, but as a personal and affective encounter with death, memory, and subjectivity.¹⁸ For Barthes, every photograph is haunted by a temporal disjunction, what he calls the *that-has-been* (*ça-a-été*).¹⁹ The photographic image testifies, in an almost ontological sense, to a past that is no longer present, thereby transforming the photograph into a trace of what is irretrievably lost. In this sense, photography is inherently elegiac: it fixes the subject while simultaneously pointing to their inevitable disappearance. Barthes introduces two critical concepts to articulate this: the *studium* or the general, cultural, or historical interest in a photograph and the *punctum*, that piercing detail which “wounds” the viewer, which makes the photograph personally significant and ethically charged.²⁰ The *punctum* resists codification; it is the site where the image breaks through discourse and demands response, not comprehension.²¹ Photography, then, according to Barthes, is not just an image to be read but a presence to be felt;²² and perhaps in that feeling arises the possibility of ethical engagement.

Meanwhile, writing in the 1970s, Susan Sontag argues that photography is a means of organizing experience and constructing a visual archive of the world; it is “essentially an act of nonintervention.”²³

¹⁷ Benjamin noted: “Photography with its various aids (lenses, enlargements) can reveal this moment. Photography makes aware for the first time the optical unconscious, just as psychoanalysis discloses the instinctual unconscious.” See Walter Benjamin, “A Short History of Photography,” in *Screen*, 13:1 (1972), 5-7.

¹⁸ Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, 77.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 78-79.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 111.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 26-27.

²² *Ibid.*, 46-47.

²³ Sontag, *On Photography*, 3, 8.

It transforms ephemeral reality into a durable image, categorizing moments and objects within a system of visual consumption.²⁴ Photography, she argues, is inherently tied to the production of knowledge and memory, but this knowledge is fragmented, selective, and shaped by conventions of style, framing, and repetition.²⁵ In her later work, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Sontag complicates her earlier positions by acknowledging the evolving nature of photographic reception and the role of context in shaping how images are interpreted.²⁶ In these two works, Sontag positions photography as a powerful apparatus that defines how modern individuals see, remember, and relate to the world, especially in an era increasingly saturated with visual media. What emerges from these foundational theories is not a unified account of photography, but a shared recognition of its double-edged power and its ability to preserve and transform, to reveal and distort, to document and aestheticize. From Benjamin's aura, Barthes' *punctum*, to Sontag's critique of the image-world, photography is consistently shown to mediate how we relate to time, memory, and reality. Yet, what remains less fully addressed in these theoretical frames is the singular presence of the human face: the irreplaceable Other who looks back through the image. To approach this dimension requires a shift from theories of representation to philosophies of relation. It is here that the next section turns to the ethical and phenomenological implications of encountering the face of the Other in photography.

THE FACE OF THE OTHER

Emmanuel Levinas' concept of the *face* (*le visage*) marks a radical departure from traditional Western conceptions of subjectivity,

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 45, 47-48.

²⁶ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 104.

knowledge, and ethics.²⁷ In the Levinasian parlance, to encounter the face of the Other is to interrupt the self's sovereignty and to inaugurate responsibility. It is important to note that the face is not merely a visible surface or empirical feature; it is not reducible to the countenance, the expression, or the physiognomy that could be described, classified, or represented.²⁸ For Levinas, the face signifies an irreducible presence that exceeds representation: a trace of infinity that disarms the gaze and forbids possession.²⁹ It is the appearance of the Other in their vulnerability, not as an object of knowledge but as a call, a summons that comes before all comprehension and all systems of recognition:

The face is similar in that it is not at all a representation, it is not a given of knowledge, nor is it a thing which comes to hand. It is an irreducible means of access, and it is in ethical terms that it can be spoken of. I have said that in my analysis of the face it is a demand; a demand, not a question. The face is a hand in search of recompense, an open hand. That is, it needs something. It is going to ask you for something. I don't know whether one can say that it is complex or simple. It is, in any case, a new way of speaking of the face.³⁰

“The face speaks,” Levinas writes, “and speaks to me. That is the fundamental event of discourse.”³¹ In this silent yet commanding phrase, the face announces the infinite vulnerability of the Other, and with it, a

²⁷ Godwin Michael Adahada, “Humanism in the Levinas’s Ethics of Responsibility,” in *Albertine Journal of Philosophy*, 6 (2022), 65.

²⁸ Fleurdeliz Altez, “Banal and Implied Forms of Violence in Levinas’ Phenomenological Ethics,” in *Kritike: An Online Journal of Philosophy*, 1:1 (2007), 61-62.

²⁹ Levinas, “The Paradox of Morality,” 168.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 168-169.

³¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. by Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 87.

radical ethical injunction: *Thou shalt not kill*.³² This imperative is not derived from reason, law, or reciprocity, but from the mere exposure of the Other's existence. It is a summons that precedes the self's autonomy, will, or decision.³³ The self is already responsible before it knows itself as a subject. This, however, is not necessarily verbal or communicative in the conventional sense. Rather, it is an ethical disturbance, an interruption that breaks through the self's tendency to reduce the other to the same, to totalize difference under categories of familiarity.³⁴

The face refuses to be absorbed into the image, the concept, or the frame. It demands that we not grasp, but respond; not consume, but encounter. The face, then, becomes a site of transcendence, not in a mystical sense, but in the sense that it transcends the categories through which we typically process and classify the world.³⁵ This understanding of the face radically challenges the Western philosophical tradition, from Plato's ideal forms to Descartes' cogito, by shifting the ground of ethics away from the self and toward the Other.³⁶ It also resists any ethics based on shared identity, mutual recognition, or social contract.³⁷ For Levinas, the ethical relation is fundamentally asymmetrical: I am responsible for the Other even when the Other is not responsible for me.³⁸ It is a relational non-relationality: a relation without symmetry or closure. It marks the point at which the self is decentered, disarmed, and ethically implicated.³⁹

³² Levinas noted: "The first word of the face is the 'Thou shalt not kill.' It is an order. There is a commandment in the appearance of the face, as if a master spoke to me. However, at the same time, the face of the Other is destitute; it is the poor for whom I can do all and to whom I owe all. And me, whoever I may be, but as a 'first person,' I am he who finds the resources to respond to the call." See *Ibid.*, 89.

³³ *Ibid.*, 90.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 87-88.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 95.

³⁶ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 88-89.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 97.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 98.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 99.

This notion of the face challenges the very premise upon which much of visual culture, including photography, is built. In the logic of visual representation, seeing is often equated with knowing, and knowing with mastery. Yet, in his early essay “Reality and Its Shadow,” Levinas expresses a profound suspicion toward the image, arguing that it neutralizes the real rather than reveals it:

The most elementary procedure of art consists in substituting for the object its image. Its image, and not its concept. A concept is the object grasped, the intelligible object. Already by action we maintain a living relationship with a real object; we grasp it, we conceive it. The image neutralizes this real relationship, this primary conceiving through action. The well-known disinterestedness of artistic vision, which the current aesthetic analysis stops with, signifies above all a blindness to concepts.⁴⁰

Hence, where ethical life is dynamic and interruptive, image-making arrests movement, rendering the world passive, available for contemplation without consequence. In this view, the image, especially the aesthetic image, is always in danger of reducing alterity to resemblance, replacing the real with its shadow. This critique reaches its sharpest point in Levinas’ claim that the artistic image induces a kind of ontological slumber: “The world of art is not a world one works in, it is a world one dreams in; it is essentially the marvelous.”⁴¹ To look at an image, then, is not simply to see but to withdraw from the concrete demands of ethical life. Images become devices of detachment, offering an illusory relation to the world, one that feels like intimacy while absolving

⁴⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, “Reality and Its Shadow,” in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 1987), 1-4.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

us from responsibility. Thus, art's disinterestedness is not aesthetic neutrality, but ethical anesthesia.

THE POSSIBILITY OF ETHICAL ENGAGEMENT IN PHOTOGRAPHY

The ethical stakes of photography lie precisely in the paradox of the image giving access to the Other, and yet that access is always mediated, partial, and vulnerable to appropriation: even as the face resists representation, it nonetheless appears. It is not that the face cannot be seen, but that it cannot be fully captured. It remains exposed and elusive, present and transcendent. This paradox opens a critical space for reconsidering photography's potential. Might it be possible for the photographic image to echo the ethical structure of the face, not by reproducing it, but by preserving its unassimilable alterity? Can the image serve not as a form of mastery but as a site of ethical interruption, an occasion for responsibility rather than recognition? To begin thinking photography through Levinas, then, is not to search for images that faithfully depict the face, but to ask whether the photographic encounter might itself become face-like: an exposure to otherness that resists enclosure. As Levinas asserts, the ethical power of the face lies in its ability to arrest the gaze and transform it into care.⁴² If certain images can enact a similar arrest, refusing spectacle, resisting sentimentality, and confronting the viewer with a non-reciprocal demand, then perhaps the image, too, as Azoulay suggests, may enter into the domain of ethical relation.⁴³

Photography, by its nature, introduces mediation as it freezes the face in time, rendering it visible across distances, and allows it to circulate in ways the original encounter never could.⁴⁴ In doing so, Sontag warns, it risks reducing the face to a signifier, a visual artifact, or worse, a

⁴² Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 85-86.

⁴³ Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, 13-14.

⁴⁴ Sontag, *On Photography*, 13.

consumable aesthetic commodity.⁴⁵ Jacques Rancière reminds us that the aesthetic can undo the visible, unsettling the sensible order and making space for new forms of perception.⁴⁶ Meanwhile, René Magritte's "The Treachery of Images" famously reminds us: *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* (This is not a pipe).⁴⁷ It is not the object itself but its image: a representation always at a remove from presence. This deceptively simple declaration destabilizes the viewer's relation to the image, revealing how easily vision slips into illusion, how what we see may mask rather than reveal.⁴⁸ Hence, one must not mistake that the photograph is the Other, for it is not; it is only a representation of the Other. It is not the suffering, the face, the cry. It is only ever a trace, a displacement. And yet, as with Magritte's pipe, the image does not fail because it is not the thing, it fails only when we forget that distinction.⁴⁹

Keeping the above point in mind, the viewer becomes sovereign again capable of looking without being looked back at, of interpreting without accountability, of seeing without being seen.⁵⁰ And yet, it would be too simplistic to conclude that photography inevitably betrays the face. While many images do indeed aestheticize or instrumentalize suffering, some photographs seem to retain, or even amplify, the ethical force of the face that Levinas describes. These are images that do not flatter or resolve, that do not invite identification or sentimentality but instead

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴⁶ Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. by Gregory Elliott (London and New York: Verso Books, 2014), 84-85.

⁴⁷ Magritte remarked: "The famous pipe. How people reproached me for it! And yet, could you stuff my pipe? No, it's just a representation, is it not? So if I had written on my picture 'This is a pipe,' I'd have been lying!" See Harry Torczyner, *Magritte: Ideas and Images* (New York: Penguin Press HC, 1979), 71-72.

⁴⁸ Foucault noted: "In any reasonable drawing, a subscript such as 'This is not a pipe' is enough immediately to divorce the figure from itself, to isolate it from its space, and to set it floating—whether near or apart from itself, whether similar to or unlike itself, no one knows." See Michel Foucault, *This Is Not a Pipe*, trans. and ed. by James Harkness (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1983), 37.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 20, 37.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 99-100.

confront the viewer with something that exceeds the frame.⁵¹ They are not images that tell us who the Other is, but that remind us how unknowable and how vulnerable the Other remains. However, despite the power that photography may or may not hold, one must heed Sontag's warning and be wary that:

To suffer is one thing; another thing is living with the photographed images of suffering, which does not necessarily strengthen conscience and the ability to be compassionate. It can also corrupt them. Once one has seen such images, one has started down the road of seeing more-and more. Images transfix. Images anesthetize. An event known through photographs certainly becomes more real than it would have been if one had never seen the photographs⁵²

In these instances, the face in the photograph is not a representation to be decoded, but a trace of a presence that cannot be captured. It may not "speak" in the literal sense, but it interrupts our seeing in a way that is ethically resonant. It exposes the viewer to their own passivity, their own implication in systems of visibility, violence, or neglect. Such confronts the viewer with their own passivity and entanglement in such systems: exposing, as Rancière suggests, not just the reality of suffering but the viewer's uneasy complicity in consuming it.⁵³ In this way, the image becomes intolerable not only because of what it reveals, but because it reflects back the unsettling fact that to witness suffering as spectacle may itself be a form of participation in its logic.⁵⁴ Hence, producing or looking at a photograph demands not recognition,

⁵¹ Sontag affirmed the capacity of photography to feel moral outrage so long as there exists a "degree of familiarity within these images." See Sontag, *On Photography*, 14.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵³ Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 83.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 84.

but responsibility. Importantly, this responsibility cannot be fulfilled by knowledge or empathy alone. Levinas warns against the reduction of ethics to comprehension, or of the Other to a version of the self.⁵⁵ The face must remain strange, irreducible, inassimilable.⁵⁶ To ethically encounter the photographed Other is not to mistake the image for presence, but to remain attuned to its *treachery*: to the gap it opens, the absence it carries, and the demand it may still articulate despite that absence. Thus, ethical photography, if such a thing is possible, must resist the temptation to explain, resolve, or humanize the Other on familiar terms. It must instead preserve the tension, the asymmetry, the ethical dissonance that Levinas insists is foundational.

The photographed face, then, is not ethical by default. It becomes so only when it resists totalization: when it refuses to become a spectacle, an icon, or an object of pity. Georges Didi-Huberman argues that such resistance is the very condition of ethical engagement with images. Confronting the contentious reception of the four clandestine photographs taken by Auschwitz's Sonderkommando, Didi-Huberman insists that images are neither transparent witnesses nor total documents. Rather, they exist in what he calls a "dual system": they bear traces of truth while remaining fragmentary and opaque, marked by absence, interruption, and uncertainty.⁵⁷ It becomes ethical when it exposes the limits of the viewer's understanding and implicates them in a responsibility they did not choose.⁵⁸ This position challenges both the sacralization of the image as a total presence and the cynical dismissal of images as aestheticized obfuscations.⁵⁹ Against these twin reductions, Didi-Huberman critiques what he calls the "dual intellectual operation" that first absolutizes the real to claim its inaccessibility, and then

⁵⁵ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 194.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 195.

⁵⁷ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 34.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 37.

absolutizes the image to revoke its legitimacy.⁶⁰ In such moments, the photograph does not simply depict the Other but rather performs the encounter with alterity that Levinas places at the heart of ethics. This possibility is fragile, contingent, and rare but it remains. And it is this fragile possibility that the photograph's capacity to carry, however faintly, the trace of the Other's demand.

COMMODIFICATION OF SUFFERING

But the possibility mentioned above faces a difficult roadblock: the commodification of suffering. The commodification of suffering in photography finds one of its earliest and most incisive theoretical antecedents in Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of the culture industry in the 1940s.⁶¹ For them, mass-produced cultural products are not benign forms of entertainment but instruments of ideological control that standardize experience and subsume aesthetic autonomy under the logic of capital.⁶² The culture industry transforms even the most intimate or traumatic aspects of human life, e.g., love, death, and pain, into spectacles formatted for consumption.⁶³ It does not merely reflect social reality; it refashions it in accordance with market imperatives, making experience digestible, repeatable, and ultimately interchangeable.⁶⁴ In this context, suffering is no longer a singular event demanding contemplation or critique but a marketable image stripped of historical depth and ethical urgency, formatted to fit seamlessly into entertainment cycles and humanitarian campaigns alike. The photographic image, then, becomes a privileged site where this logic unfolds: it captures the trace of pain, but

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁶¹ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. by Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 94-95.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 96.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 109-110.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 119-120.

often only to sell, soothe, or seduce. Thus, before we can speak of the ethical demands of photography, we must first account for the systemic forces that mediate its production and reception.

Images of suffering have long been a staple of visual culture, traversing the domains of war journalism, humanitarian campaigns, art, and, more recently, social media. But when pain becomes a circulating image, it also becomes vulnerable to commodification. Photography, particularly in its mass-reproduced and digitally circulated forms, can aestheticize and objectify suffering, transforming human anguish into a consumable spectacle. The ethical problem is not simply that suffering is represented, but that it is mediated through economies of visibility, where the value of the image often supersedes the reality it attempts to depict.

Susan Sontag shows that to photograph a person in pain is never a neutral act: it is an assertion of power over visibility, representation, and, ultimately, narrative ownership.⁶⁵ In commodified visual economies, the photograph often functions less as a record of human suffering than as a consumable object shaped for emotional effect.⁶⁶ The lived complexity of the subject, be it a starving child, a war-torn village, or a grieving mother, is frequently reduced to a visual trope that serves the viewer's sensibility rather than the subject's dignity. This displacement invites us to ask: who owns the image of suffering, and to what end is it circulated? Whose story is being told, and who has the right to tell it? In such images, the viewer is not necessarily called to solidarity or transformation, but rather positioned as a passive recipient of emotion, invited to feel, to share, even to donate, but not to intervene meaningfully.⁶⁷ Over time, the repetitive circulation of such imagery can lead to an anesthetizing effect: the extraordinary becomes ordinary, pain becomes aestheticized, and the ethical urgency that once accompanied the image dissolves into ambient

⁶⁵ Sontag, *On Photography*, 33-34.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 26-27.

noise.⁶⁸ This process is exacerbated by the visual economies of the digital age. In an attention-driven culture, images of suffering often compete for visibility within saturated feeds, stripped of historical context and reduced to shock value.⁶⁹ As Azoulay argued, the camera often functions within imperial and neoliberal logics of governance that reduce the photographed subject, especially the vulnerable, the racialized, and the dispossessed, to “objects of compassion” rather than agents of rights.⁷⁰ The photograph, then, becomes a mode of regulating empathy, prefiguring the viewer’s moral and political stance through pre-constructed narratives of victimhood and helplessness.⁷¹

Thus the notion of “frames of recognizability” of Judith Butler may shed light on why some suffering is more visible and more grievable than others.⁷² The photograph does not merely record suffering; it also frames it in such a way that it becomes intelligible within certain normative grids. Suffering in the Global South, for instance, is often portrayed as endemic, timeless, and depoliticized, thereby defusing any real critique of structural violence or global inequality.⁷³ The image circulates not to indict the systems that produce suffering but to reassure viewers of their own ethical standing, or worse, to mobilize consumption under the guise of philanthropy.⁷⁴ The commodification of suffering also brings into question the agency of the photographed subject. As viewers, we are rarely invited to consider whether the subject consented to being photographed, or whether they have control over how their image is used and interpreted. The logic of visual capture often overrides the subject’s autonomy, echoing colonial forms of ethnographic documentation where the camera served as a tool of domination and objectification. In such

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 140.

⁷⁰ Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, 17.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 18-19.

⁷² Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London and New York: Verso Books, 2016), 13.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

cases, the image not only represents suffering; it replicates the very structures that produce it.

Yet the answer is not simply to turn away from images of suffering, as if non-representation were ethically cleaner. As Sontag herself acknowledged, photographs can still provoke moral reflection but only if they resist being instrumentalized.⁷⁵ This means treating photographs not as ends in themselves but as provocations: fragments that gesture toward a reality always exceeding the frame. The ethical demand, then, is not merely to feel sympathy, but to interrogate the conditions under which suffering becomes visible, and to reflect on our position within those conditions.

PERCEIVING HUMANITY

One cannot simply reduce life to a frame; an object of spectacle to “end in a photograph.”⁷⁶ To perceive humanity through photography is not merely to witness suffering but to confront the moral conditions under which such witnessing occurs. In the aftermath of the camera’s click, the photographed subject is both revealed and removed, situated within a system of representation over which they often have little control. This complex triangulation between subject, image, and viewer demands a reconsideration of what it means to “perceive” ethically, especially in contexts marked by historical trauma, structural inequality, or political violence.

The act of perceiving is equally not innocent as the act of clicking the camera as the viewer may be lulled into a passive position of spectatorship, where the repetition of images of suffering dulls critical sensibility and numbs moral responsiveness.⁷⁷ The viewer is neither the

⁷⁵ Sontag, *On Photography*, 52.

⁷⁶ Sontag remarked: “Mallarmé said that everything in the world exists in order to end in a book. Today everything exists to end in a photograph.” See *Ibid.*, 24.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 140-141.

original witness nor a participant in the events depicted, yet they are never wholly uninvolved. The very act of viewing becomes an ethical encounter that implicates the spectator in systems of power and meaning. To perceive humanity in this sense is to recognize not only the personhood of the photographed subject but also the viewer's own position within the visual economy that makes such images possible. This confrontation raises an essential question: can the viewer be freed from the guilt of passive consumption and the spectacle of suffering? If, as Butler argues, perception is conditioned by the structures that render some lives visible and others disposable, then to perceive humanity is to resist the inherited frames of recognition that so often dehumanize or fetishize the suffering subject.⁷⁸ This ethical mode of perception demands more than empathy: it requires accountability. Viewing, then, becomes a civic practice, wherein the spectator is summoned not to act upon the subject but to acknowledge the conditions under which their visibility is granted or denied.⁷⁹ It is not compassion alone but a form of co-responsibility that characterizes this perceptual ethic.

On the matter of the photographer who also shares a great amount of responsibility as the viewer (perhaps even more), a photographer is never acquitted from moral guilt. Contrary to Diane Arbus' infamous quote, "photography was a license to go wherever I wanted and to do what I wanted to do," a photographer's task is not merely to expose but to situate themselves ethically in relation to what is shown. As such, the act of taking photographs involves more than technical or aesthetic decisions; it means acknowledging the inherent violence of the photographic apparatus and seeking forms of representation that do not flatten or instrumentalize the subject. The question becomes: what can the photographer give after being complicit in an act of capture? One possible answer lies in the photographer's capacity to withhold, to resist the total exposure of the subject, to frame with care rather than with conquest. In

⁷⁸ Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?*, 24-26.

⁷⁹ Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, 383.

this gesture of restraint, the photographer may create a proximity, a space for the subject's opacity, preserving their dignity by not claiming full access. As Tina Campt suggests, the most powerful photographs may not be those that scream but those that whisper, images that ask the viewer not to look harder, but to look differently.⁸⁰ This reorientation from mastery to listening reconfigures perception itself as a practice of ethical attunement. Perceiving humanity therefore is not about catharsis or closure but about sustaining a relationship to vulnerability that does not seek to resolve or appropriate. The viewer's responsibility is not to rescue, pity, or consume, but to remain accountable and to refuse the comfort of disavowal and to allow the photograph to provoke a continuous, unresolved recognition of the other's irreducible life.⁸¹

RADICALITY AND RESPONSIBILITY: SEEING, ETHICS, AND EMPATHY

How can we, either as a photographer or viewer, resist the reduction of the image to spectacle or information and cultivate a form of vision that acknowledges responsibility and sustains radical empathy? There is really no straightforward answer. However, Rancière has argued that politics is constituted through "the distribution of the sensible" or the ways in which visibility and invisibility are structured.⁸² Ethical seeing, then, becomes a political act: to perceive that which is excluded, marginalized, or silenced is already to participate in a reconfiguration of the sensible world. Photography, then, is not only a record of what happened; it is also an intervention into what counts as reality, what deserves attention, and who may be seen as fully human.

⁸⁰ Tina Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 41-42.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 43; see also Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*, 32.

⁸² Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. by Gabriel Rockhill (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 12-14.

Yet this reconfiguration requires more than recognition. As Emmanuel Levinas emphasized again and again, the ethical relation begins with the face of the Other, a face that commands, rather than merely requests, responsibility.⁸³ The ethical force of the face, as Levinas conceives it, lies in its resistance to totalization: it cannot be fully known, captured, or reduced to image. In photographic terms, this suggests that the radical potential of photography is found not in its clarity but in its excess, in what remains unresolved, unspoken, or even unseen within the frame. The image, then, becomes ethical when it retains the Other's irreducibility and refrains from claiming mastery. Seeing, in this sense, is radical when it resists the drive for consumption and instead sustains a tension with what cannot be fully seen.

Empathy, consequently, must be rethought beyond affective identification. Traditional conceptions of empathy risk collapsing the distance between viewer and subject, projecting one's own feelings onto the image of the other.⁸⁴ Such projections may offer catharsis, but they often mask deeper structures of inequality and privilege. Instead, radical empathy requires openness to the other's alterity, an ethical responsiveness that does not presume to know, feel, or speak for them.⁸⁵ It is a willingness to be unsettled, to remain in discomfort, and to act from that space of unknowing.⁸⁶

The ethical responsibility of both photographer and viewer, therefore, is not simply to reveal or to feel, but to create and inhabit images that resist appropriation. This may mean disrupting conventional modes of representation, decentering the voyeuristic gaze, or foregrounding the subject's agency within the frame. Ethical seeing is not passive but rather becomes a form of political labor, one that demands the

⁸³ Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 91-92. See also Levinas, "The Paradox of Morality," 171-172.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 176-177.

⁸⁵ Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 15-36.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 33-34.

viewer remain answerable to what they see and how they see it.⁸⁷ In this radical rethinking, photography emerges not as a transparent window to the world, but as a site of ethical encounter: fractured, incomplete, but charged with responsibility. The image does not dictate what should be felt or done but leaves open a space of decision, where empathy becomes a matter of commitment rather than sentiment, and responsibility is forged in the recognition of the image's limits as much as its contents.

BEYOND WITNESSING: TOWARD AND ETHICS OF RESPONSE

To witness suffering through the lens of photography is not the end of ethical responsibility: it is, at most, its precondition. If witnessing remains at the level of visual consumption or abstract recognition, then it risks reproducing the same dynamics of detachment and passivity that ethical seeing intends to challenge. What, then, comes after witnessing? How can one move from the position of a distant spectator to that of an ethically implicated subject? This is the question that animates a shift from witnessing to response. Accordingly, ethical response is not merely a matter of moral sentiment, nor is it reducible to humanitarian action.⁸⁸ Rather, it involves a sustained interrogation of one's position in relation to the suffering of others, an acknowledgment of the structural, historical, and political conditions that render some lives visible and grievable, and others not.⁸⁹ Judith Butler reminds us that the very categories of the human are unevenly distributed, governed by regimes of representation that determine which bodies come to matter.⁹⁰ Thus, responding ethically requires not only feeling for the Other, but confronting the norms that render the Other as "other" in the first place.

⁸⁷ Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, 13-14.

⁸⁸ Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, 120-121.

⁸⁹ Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*, 5-6.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 31-32.

In this sense, ethical response entails a practice of unlearning. It involves suspending the reflex to interpret images of suffering as immediately knowable or actionable. As Azoulay has argued, photography must be understood not only as an art form or documentation tool, but as part of a civil contract that implicates all participants, i.e., the photographer, subject, and viewer, in a shared political space.⁹¹ This contract demands more than recognition; it calls for accountability. The viewer is not an innocent observer but a citizen among others, bound by the ethical obligation to respond to what the image both reveals and conceals.

This obligation is made even more pressing by the global circulation of images in digital and networked contexts. In an age where the image is incessantly shared, modified, and recontextualized, the ethical stakes are multiplied. Images are no longer bounded by the intentions of the photographer or the moment of capture as they are always on the move, embedded in new economies of attention, visibility, and capital. To respond ethically, then, is also to take responsibility for the life of the image beyond its original frame: to ask where and how it circulates, what it authorizes, and whose interests it serves. Moreover, ethical response is not limited to the domain of representation. It must also be enacted through institutional, political, and collective commitments. The question is not only how to see ethically, but how to act justly in light of what has been seen. This may involve resisting the commodification of suffering, amplifying marginalized voices, or supporting structural transformation. Crucially, it means resisting the fantasy that the image alone can do this work for us. As Sontag ultimately came to realize, images may move us, but they do not absolve us.⁹² They are, at best, an opening, a sort of summons that must be answered not with feeling alone, but with sustained ethical and political practice.

⁹¹ Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, 381-383. See also Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 111, 117-120.

⁹² Sontag, *On Photography*, 104, 126.

To go beyond witnessing, then, is to enter into a mode of responsibility that is both affective and structural, both individual and collective. It is to inhabit the discomfort of not knowing exactly how to respond, while still being called to respond. It is to recognize that the ethical power of photography lies not in its capacity to show everything, but in its capacity to ask something of us: something that cannot be outsourced to the image, and that can only be answered in how we live, see, and act differently.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the course of this discussion, I have attempted not only to interrogate the ethical dimensions of photography but also to reflect on the conditions under which such interrogation becomes possible. What emerges is an image that demands our attention not simply for what it depicts, but for what it does, for how it situates us in relation to the world, to others, and to ourselves. Photography does not merely record such relations; it produces them. And this production, framed as neutral or mechanical, is precisely what must be contested. What matters is not whether the camera captures “truth,” but what kinds of truths it makes visible, and at what cost.

I return, then, to the ethical anxiety that hovers over every photograph of suffering: What am I looking at, and who does this act of looking serve? Does this image humanize, or does it flatten life into symbol? What, if anything, am I asked to do? These are not merely questions for the critic or the photographer as they are the viewer's burden as well. Spectatorship is not passive. It is a form of relation, and like all relations, it must be interrogated for its ethical content.

To move beyond the limits of witnessing is not to demand that the image do more than it can, but to take responsibility for how we relate to it. That responsibility is not reducible to sentiment or outrage; it is a practice of attention, a discipline of interpretation, a refusal of closure. It

means seeing the image not as evidence to be consumed, but as a fragment, partial, opaque, and haunted by what it cannot show.⁹³ To respond ethically is to remain with that opacity, to allow it to unsettle us, to displace our sense of mastery. Perhaps photography will always hover between the desire to know and the impossibility of knowing fully: it must always be vague, similar to Adorno's "vague notion of a (good?) life."⁹⁴ But it is in this in-between space that ethical possibility emerges: not as resolution, but as tension, as refusal, as care. The image does not save; it does not redeem. But it can mark an opening, a threshold where we begin to ask better questions about the world, about others, and about the responsibilities we inherit by the very fact of seeing.

How so? I cannot offer a formula for there really is none. But I hope to have shown that the ethics of photography does not lie in the image itself, but in the relational space it opens between viewer, subject, and context; between representation and responsibility. To practice this ethics requires vigilance, humility, and above all, a willingness to remain uncomfortable. It requires seeing not just what is before the lens, but what lies beyond it: histories of violence, systems of power, and possibilities for solidarity.

⁹³ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor (London and New York: Continuum, 2002), 10, 15.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 295.

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