

Globalizing Compassion, Photography, and the Challenge of Terror

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**Abstract:** In his article, "Globalizing Compassion, Photography, and the Challenge of Terror," Ariel Dorfman reflects on the use of photography to make global violence visible and to mourn the losses caused by acts of terror. Dorfman draws on events that range from the attacks on the World Trade Center to Pinochet's dictatorship to other similar atrocities and he shows that, while these events always feel singular in the moment, they are best understood comparatively. At the core of the paper is a central question: does the shared practice of using photos to represent terror help build bridges across humanity or does it serve as a form of separation? Does it help to globalize compassion or does it justify isolationism and protectionism? And behind these questions lies an even more disturbing concern: How do we mourn those who leave behind no photographic record? In a world that often seems like a superspectacle and where everything is offered up for visual consumption, the ultimate challenge to globalization lies in the lives that leave no visual record.

**Ariel DORFMAN**

### **Globalizing Compassion, Photography, and the Challenge of Terror**

We have grown strangely used to them over the last twenty-five years, the women with the small photo of a man pinned to their dark dresses, the extended tribe of those whose loved ones, from Chile to Kurdistan, from Argentina to Ethiopia, from Guatemala to Guinea, have been abducted in the night and never heard of again. Mothers and daughters, wives and sisters, demanding to know the true fate of their men, demanding that they be returned to their families alive. They have become a habitual presence, these faraway women on the television screen asking at least for a body to bury, asking that they be allowed to start mourning their dead. A widespread, almost epidemic, image of tragedy and defiance that is just as much a part of our planetary imagination as the brands and logos that pervade us with an opposite sort of message: the Golden Arches of McDonalds, the red glistening cans of Coca-Cola, the Nike symbols of acceleration, the United Colors of Benetton that promise life everlasting through incessant consumption.

The misfortune of women who search for information about their missing husbands, sons, fathers, brothers, lovers, is as haplessly old as the wars and slaughterhouses with which we humans have disgraced ourselves throughout our history. What is specifically new about the iconic representation of woe which anyone who owns a television can now recognize and identify, is not the repression or the pain, but rather the form of spectacle that these demonstrations have taken, how the performance of that pain is only conceivable in the context of present-day globalization. Indeed, those marching women brandishing a black-and-white photo have become so natural to our eyes, so much a part of the mythical landscape of our time, that we tend to forget that there was a time, not very long ago, when photographs did not constitute an automatic ingredient of that sort of protest.

As far as I can tell the first time photos were displayed as a means of responding to the state terror that uses disappearance as a form of control and punishment was in June 1977 when a group of Chilean women whose relatives had been arrested by General Pinochet's secret police in the years after the 1973 coup decided to go on a hunger strike to force the military and judicial authorities to acknowledge those detentions. That they chose to do so in the regional offices of the United Nations in Santiago may have initially been due to the relative safety that an international organization provided under a dictatorship but, more crucially, suggests that their targeted audience was potentially the wide world beyond the country's frontiers rather than their own countrymen, most of whom had no way of being informed about even the existence of this rally. I am not sure if the organizers of that protest immediately realized how influential and far-reaching the image they had created was to become in their own struggle and they certainly could not have anticipated the ways in which it would be adopted by people with similar dilemmas all over the globe, from Cyprus to Mexico. What probably mattered most to them was that the exhibition of those photos fiercely expressed the core of their tragedy. The central drama of those women was, after all, that they had no body to oppose to the denial of responsibility by the authorities, no way of countering the refusal of the judges to accept writs of habeas corpus because, to put it bluntly, there was no corpus. No body. Dead or alive. The photo became a substitute for the body that the government officials contended had never been arrested, a way of bringing into visibility someone who was at that very moment being hidden from view, whose corpse, if indeed the detainee had been killed, was being denied the right to denounce the crime committed against it, the only vocabulary left to the dead. When the relatives showed bystanders that replica in celluloid, they were making present and material and lifelike what had been phantasmagorically removed from their hands, they were calling attention to a moment that had existed in the past when that loved one had been alive and a finger had clicked on a camera, they were

demanding a moment in the future when that loved one could once again stand in front of them, could step out of the photo and into life, could climb out of their memory and into life. It was only in the months and years that followed, as the relatives took their protest into the streets, that they discovered that, beyond telling the essence of their predicament with extreme efficiency and extraordinary poetry, those stark semblances of the missing also answered the needs of the contemporary media, its time constraints, its hunger for visually striking imagery, its audiences with their short attention spans. And when the police attacked the women, jailed them, ripped the photos from their dresses or kicked the placards upon which the photos had been reproduced, these scenes were then also transmitted over and over again to the world. In the violence done to the relatives because they dared to remember and to bring their memories into communal spaces, the regime was being forced to publicly reenact the secret, covert outrage done to the original bodies in the dank privacy of jails and base-ments and concentration camps.

Making that violence globally visible was a particularly apt response to disappearance because that extreme form of repression originated, in fact, in a strategy of a dictatorship that had a global component from the start. The new rulers of Chile were determined to integrate their country into the worldwide market and join what they called the "civilized concert of nations." A membership that entailed two contradictory requirements. On the one hand, the need to terrorize a restless and recalcitrant populace into submission and make it economically and politically pliant for the experiment of what was, quite blatantly, called "shock therapy." This was coupled, on the other hand, with the need to present an immaculate face to the international community and therefore distance officials from any acts of barbarism. And disappearances fit this bill perfectly: dissidents and revolutionaries could be conveniently tortured to death without any of their executioners ever being held accountable; terror could reign in the whispers of the mind without the government having to openly admit to being the source of those whispers, of that terror.

It is this perverse tactic of invisibility that is fractured by the bodies of the women and the photos pinned to their clothes, that the photos of their resistance and repression further perturb and disrupt, a cycle of visual transgressions that were to grow amazingly into a worldwide movement. It is incredible, after all, that one small gesture by one solitary woman in a violated Chilean home, a woman who looks at the faded image of her absent loved one and comes to understand that its public exposure can keep him alive inside her and in the world, so encouraging that merely that one modest, unpretentious image can speak louder than all the machinery of the State, and can finally spread and extend its reach until it is imitated all over the world. The ferocity with which the masters of these many misdeveloped nations have dragged their societies, quite literally kicking and screaming, into modernity is answered by a denunciation of the consequences of that process of forced development, using none other than the central invention of modernity, photography, shrewdly appropriated by the victims. Two possibilities of globalization face to face: the high technology of systematic fear employed by tyrants, their scientific use of torture and censorship and propaganda and, of course, of spying through cameras, confronted by the cunning and defiance of multitudes of humiliated women with their low-tech performances, their snapshots of bodies that refuse to be silenced. The technology of dictators, which tries to turn the lives of their subjects into fictions, confronting the technology of the rebels, who use what is, after all, no more substantial and material than a replica, a trace on a piece of paper, a representation of existence, to shove denied reality back into the dictator's face. Two ways of using and abusing science: one that is secretive and affirms the right to exist only for those who have monopolized science's knowledge and chained that knowledge to destruction, and another, more democratic form of science that puts in the hands of people everywhere the means to re-create and multiply their own existence.

At a time in history when it is all too easy to feel defenseless and passive and irrelevant in the face of a global profiteering disorder that often seems to be beyond the control of even its most dominant elites, a planetary network that acts according to scarcely comprehensible laws, it is heartening to see how some of the least powerful people on this Earth can score a victory of the imagination against their enemies, can prove that it is possible for the modernity of human rights to defeat the modernity of inhuman authoritarianism. Indeed, I would venture to suggest that the relatives of the disappeared are handing us a model for how other humans can make use of the forces of globalization to make this world a less threatening home for us all.

And yet, a note of caution.

If you go through a little booklet published many years ago by the Association of Relatives of Arrested and Disappeared Persons in Chile, which lists and seeks to portray some of the peasants abducted by the authorities since 1973, you will notice, on the very first page, six names with respective spaces for their photos. Two of these spaces are blank -- those meant for Antonio Aninao Morales and Juan Salinas Salinas. Of these two, not even a photograph remains. They are men who lived their twentieth-century lives without once being photographed. Let me repeat this: they were never captured by the process invented by Louis Daguerre more than a hundred years before their birth. It is only the kidnapping of Salinas and Aninao that, paradoxically, calls them at all to our attention among the millions who are too poor or marginalized to have been captured by a camera, who are outside the eyes of modernity. And if you continue to read the booklet, on each page there are several more unphotographed peasants, until the last page where all four of those named are without an image. That deep blankness ends up being the only visual evidence that they ever existed.

These are the true *desaparecidos* of humanity, those who are missing because, in reality, the modern world acts as if, all this while, they had never been there at all, members of orphaned countries that seem to flicker into public consciousness only when they cause trouble, when they upset strategic balances or unhinge the lives of those who watch from the comfort of detached television screens. They were missing before the police came for them. They came late to the distribution of words and techniques and knowledge and, yes, to the saving grace of photography itself, perhaps suspecting that they would merit neither a footnote in the pages of anybody's history book, nor even a few seconds on the nightly news.

I have spent many hours looking at those empty spaces, wondering how those men lived and how they died, who they were, what their eyes might have told me if I had ever met them. The truth is that I know nothing about them. All that I really receive back from that absence is my own reflection.

In the supermarket and superspectacle that our planet is slowly becoming, it is the unknown Salinases and Aninaos of the world who pose the ultimate challenge to globalization. It is one of the great tragedies of our time that we have been unable to organize a world where men like them and their billions of brothers and sisters from all the other continents are included and finally seen, really seen. Everyone on this Earth, I believe, is a member of a vastly interconnected humanity, and the recent terrible events of September 11, 2001, in the United States would seem to confirm that we ignore this fact at our peril.

How to imagine those who live outside the dominant forms of modernity? Is it even possible? Are we too far away to even represent those lost men, those muted women?

Strange as this may sound, I see a dreadful form of hope in the dark blizzard of photos that began to cover the streets of New York precisely after those criminal acts of terror that devastated that city in September 2001. It is an extraordinary recognition of our common humanity that the inhabitants of the most prosperous metropolis in the world, when faced with the infernal dilemma of

dealing with the instantaneous and violent disappearance of friends and relatives whose death could be presumed but not ascertained because of the lack of a body, spontaneously recurred to the same methods of memory and defiance that thousands upon thousands of others from the most remote and often impoverished regions of the planet have invented over the last twenty-five years to cope with a similar mental hell.

I am aware, of course, of the distances and differences that separate the missing of New York and their relatives, friends, and community from those who are *desaparecidos* in the rest of the world and am wary of conflating these quite distinct tragedies. It is not their own government that has concealed the bodies incinerated in the Twin Towers or that has mocked those who seek information regarding their whereabouts. And the photos themselves probably originated in a long-standing American tradition that has proliferated images of lost children over the years on milk cartons and on other commercial and postal sites. And yet, the inhabitants of the most modernized society in the world may now be able to connect, in ways that would have been unthinkable before September 11, 2001, to the experience of so many hitherto inaccessible planetary others. How can they not understand, now that they know what it means to have thousands of people suddenly evaporate into nothingness with no body to prove or disprove life or death, how can they not feel closer to an old woman I know in Chile who still awakes after midnight, still awakes, even now, and listens for footsteps that could be her husband's, even though she knows that twenty-seven years have gone by and that it would be better that he not return, who would want him to be tortured for those long years? How can they not empathize more, now that they hold up their photos to search for a sliver of certainty, to find a final witness to their beloved's last moments, those words from some stranger, a message sent to us from the dead? How can their hearts not go out to the grandmothers in Argentina determined to track down the children of their sons and daughters born in captivity and farmed out to sterile military families, those grandmothers who want to see in the eyes of those babies now grown up the ultimate inheritance left behind by their dead offspring? As the operation in the smoldering ruins of the World Trade Center wearily turned from rescue to recovery, as the expectation of one more miracle gave way to the conviction that there can be no more survivors, how can they not have shared the grief of the families of the *desaparecidos* of other lands, when there is no more hope? If New Yorkers are discovering what the women of the missing in Chile and Cyprus and Cambodia and Brazzaville also gradually realized, that their flock of photographs shrouding the entire city are ultimately destined to become a transitory burial ground where the living and the dead can commune, a site of the collective mourning imagination, the only scattered monument immediately possible in the months to come for a city that needs to turn itself into an extended graveyard of its missing dead if it is to go on with life, how can these fundamental, radical experiences of death and vulnerability not open millions of Americans up to the meaning of disappearance in its multiple forms? How can the horror and wonder of breathing an air filled with the oxygen of the absent dead not help them and us to feel linked to the deep suffering and redemption of so many of our faraway kinsmen across the earth?

There is, of course, no guarantee that pain and victimhood lead to empathy, no certainty that this will allow the Salinases of the world to emerge from invisibility. Enormous sorrows can lead to self-absorption and indifference. Horror and pain can lead the powerful to vent upon the innocent in faraway lands their rage and frustration -- just look at the campaign against Iraq!

But that is the challenge of the moment: to find ways to make this new global tragedy draw us all closer to each other, not because we can now kill one another more easily and with more devastating effects, but closer because we share the same need to mourn, the same flesh that can be torn, the same impulse toward compassion. And closer also to the day when the most powerful members of humankind can pin to our clothes that blank photo of the disappeared, that image of an emptiness and

absence that threatens to devour us all. Yes, perhaps our species is oh so slowly getting ready for the day when enough of us will want to wander the boundaries of this Earth until we have brought the lost souls of modernity, like the other missing of the world, back from death and oblivion.

Note: This essay first appeared Ariel Dorfman, "Globalizing Compassion: Photography and the Challenge of Terror" in Ariel Dorfman, *Other Septembers, Many Americas: Selected Provocations, 1980-2004*. New York: Seven Stories P, 2004. 3-10. Republished with permission by Seven Stories Press <<http://www.sevenstories.com>>.

Author's profile: Ariel Dorfman teaches literature and Latin American studies at Duke University, holding the Walter Hines Page Chair. Before coming to Duke, he taught at the universities of Chile, Amsterdam, and Maryland, and at the Sorbonne. He is a Chilean-American novelist, playwright, poet, essayist, journalist, and human rights activist. His non-fiction publications include: *Imaginación y Violencia en América* (Imagination and Violence in Latin America), *Hacia la liberación del lector Americano* (Towards the Liberation of the Latin American Reader), *Para Leer al Pato Donald* (How to Read Donald Duck), *The Empire's Old Clothes*, *Some Write to the Future*, *Other Septembers*, *Many Americas*, and his memoir *Heading South, Looking North*. As a writer of fiction, he has published, among others, *Blake's Therapy* (*Terapia*), *Viudas* (*Widows*), *Cria Ojos* (Raising Eyes), *La Última Canción de Manuel Sendero* (*The Last Song of Manuel Sendero*), *Máscaras* (*Mascara*), *The Nanny and the Iceberg*, and *Konfidenz*. He has also written poetry in the collections *In Case of Fire in a Foreign Land* and *Pruebas al Canto* (*Soft Evidence*), receiving the 1995 Charity Randall Citation from the International Poetry Forum. He contributes regularly to a number of publications worldwide as a commentator and journalist. His plays *Widows*, *Reader* and *Death and the Maiden* have received many major awards. He is the first Latin American writer to receive the Sir Laurence Olivier Award for best play in England (1992). The film *Death and the Maiden* was co-written and co-produced by Dorfman and directed by Roman Polanski. Dorfman has also co-written an award winning BBC teleplay *Prisoners in Time* (1995) and co-directed the short, *My House is on Fire*. His latest books are a novel he has co-written with his son, Joaquín Dorfman, *The Burning City* and *Desert Memories: A Journey through the Chilean North*, which won the Lowell Thomas Silver Award for travel writing. His play, *Speak Truth to Power: Voices From Beyond the Dark*, premiered at the Kennedy Center and was transmitted nationally as part of the PBS series *great performances*. Dorfman's recent projects include a musical, *Dancing Shadows*, which premiered in July in Seoul, Korea (winning a Best Musical award), and the screen adaptation of his memoir, *A Promise to the Dead*, which was directed by Peter Raymont and premiered at the Toronto Film Festival in 2007. E-mail: <[adorfman@duke.edu](mailto:adorfman@duke.edu)>