Atrocity, the ‘As If,’ and Impending Death from the Khmer Rouge

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Atrocity, the "As If," and Impending Death from the Khmer Rouge

Barbie Zelizer

Atrocity depends on a wide repertoire of visual tropes for its depiction in the news. Resulting from violence and bodily harm that tend to be more unseen than visible and that generate their name primarily after multiple instances of brutal death have already occurred, atrocity's shaping as mediated news images proceeds in an irregular, incremental and often non-intuitive fashion. Keeping pace with the delayed and incomplete nature of its visualization in the real world, atrocity's depiction often relies more on impulses of supposition, subjecjunctivity, and implication - the "as if" - than on the certain and often dispassionate depiction of evidentiary fact - the "as is." This makes tropes that play to the "as if" valuable for depicting atrocity, even if they do not adhere well to journalism's more general reliance on the "as is."

The about-to-die image - pictures of people facing impending death rather than images of them already dead - is a useful illustration of how evidentiary fact can be pushed aside in journalism's depiction of atrocity. Put simply, the about-to-die image focuses on the intense human anguish that comes with facing death. It depicts the display of death-in-process in atrocities as wide-ranging as torture, crime, assassination, war, and acts of terrorism, where its repeated and widespread appearance reduces complicated circumstances involving intentional death into heart-rending moments of intense personal fear and dread.

Reminiscent of Aristotle's injunction to dramatists to place death offstage and drawing on Roland Barthes' interest in the special temporality created by the "will have been" of future anteriority, the about-to-die image works by coaxing people to suspend disbelief, deferring their knowledge of where the depiction leads so as to engage with a scene that shows less information than is known. Freezing the moment of people about to die as a visual frame, these photos, extending Gotthold Lessing's words about the strength of painting, depict "but a single moment of an action, and must therefore choose
the most pregnant one, the one most suggestive of what has gone before and what is to follow." Their play upon contingency, the emotions and the imagination to shape the public's engagement with atrocity means that understanding is suspended so as to facilitate the act of seeing.

Significantly, the about-to-die image draws attention through its generalizability, not its specificity: the impending deaths from systematic murder in Nazi Europe look like those in the Middle East, much as assassinations in Guatemala resemble those in the United States. Coaxing people to complete understanding by filling in what they do not see and compelling emotional engagement rather than introducing rational distance, the about-to-die image works as a tool of both news depiction and collective memory, becoming the central and often iconic image that stands in for a wide range of difficult and often contested news events. Sustained over time, photos of people facing death are used long after they are already dead, recycled into various contexts where they win awards, drive retrospectives, and take on iconic status. No surprise, then, that they travel to contexts other than the news, appearing widely across educational, political, cultural, commercial, and religious venues.

What does it mean when news images encourage the emotions, the imagination, and contingency as a way of responding to atrocity? And why would such incomplete and subjunctive images persist after the news is known? Challenging traditional notions that news images provide timely coverage of unfolding news events in accordance with adjacent notions of reasoned information, the about-to-die image offers an opportunity to consider how the "as if" of mediated depiction shapes the treatment of and response to atrocity, even when it reflects less information than is generally known.

About-to-die from the Khmer Rouge

The U.S. news media coverage of the Cambodian atrocities committed by the Khmer Rouge during the 1970s provides one example of how the about-to-die image drives an unusual relationship between understanding and seeing. Pictures of individuals facing death at the hands of the Khmer Rouge, helmed by Pol Pot, constitute a troubling documentary record of people about to die, but it was not one that most U.S. journalists covered at the time of the story's unfolding. Though the account of what transpired under the Khmer Rouge was pieced together bit by bit over the years of the Pol Pot regime, its visual record only came together decades after the regime had been disman-
tled. And yet it was the images — numerous, formulaic, and repetitive in the horror they suggested — that drove public attention after the fact.

The atrocities, committed over four years, were systematic, expansive, and bureaucratic in detail. About 1.7 million people — a quarter of Cambodia’s population — died after being herded from cities into torture centers and prisons during the Khmer Rouge rule. The photographic record of these individuals’ last moments before death offered brutal illustration of a brief but intense reign of terror. Having come to power following the war in Cambodia under the radar of most of the U.S. news media, the Khmer Rouge was “red, cruel and, after five years, little known.” When Pol Pot forced the evacuation of Phnom Penh and other large cities, news organizations verbally reported a massive bloodbath with thousands of victims but provided no pictures. Rather, as the Khmer Rouge sealed the country from outside eyes, barring the foreign news media and generating uncertain, often speculative reporting, journalists were unable to interpret what was happening and offered such uneven documentation — and no visuals — that William Safire remarked, “What kind of bloodbath is it, after all, that goes on unrecorded by videotape?”

In the late 1970s, CBS and PBS both aired documentaries, but they too offered little visual information: on the former, the New York Times remarked that “the Cambodia story does not lend itself to easy ‘visuals,’” displaying pictures that are “largely unremarkable. Deserted city streets are contrasted to crowded rice and salt fields, and a few factories”; on the latter, it noted that “Cambodia is proving a difficult subject for television to cover. On the one hand, there is too little, as American crews have limited access to the country. On the other, there is too much, as the few films that are available provide scenes of devastating horror.” Though verbal estimates of the dead by then stretched to more than a million victims, the story of the Cambodian atrocities still remained in need of visualization. Much like the liberation of the concentration camps of World War II, the story needed to be seen to be believed, even if its visualization were to come at a delay.

That situation changed in 1979, when the Pol Pot government was overthrown by the Vietnamese. It was then that the story of the Khmer Rouge atrocities began to take on visual and material form. Within the year the archive of the main prison south of Phnom Penh, Tuol Sleng, or S-21 Prison, was discovered, and United Nations workers and human rights activists who traveled to the region made available thousands of personal snapshots of victims that the Khmer Rouge had meticulously ordered by number and filed into storage. Their files
provided a detailed record of close to fifteen thousand men, women and children in their last moments before they had been killed. Bits and pieces of their story, largely told through its visual documentation, began to come together.

The prison's photographic unit, controlled by the security police, had been responsible for taking photos of each man, woman, and child who had entered the prison. Framed as either full-length or head and shoulder frontal shots, the images of Cambodians about to die, called "portraits of the condemned," documented mass and systematic execution in various locations across Cambodia from 1975 onward. The pictures were arresting, both for their strict patterning and their undiluted engagement with the photographer and by extension the viewer. Each image portrayed a single individual, positioned squarely in the middle of the frame. Male and female, young and old— all nameless, anonymous, and voiceless—they stared frontally into the lens of the camera. Their hands tied behind their backs, standing stiffly and in identical poses against a bare wall, some pursed their lips and widened their eyes, while others looked stoic, expressionless, and vacant; some bore the marks of beatings on their faces. Dressed in simple black or white clothing, each individual bore a number pinned to his or her shirt. Taken by Khmer Rouge officials—or their designates—the process for visual recording was simple: "As each prisoner was brought in, a blindfold was ripped from his face. 'Where am I?' some of the prisoners asked. The young photographer was not permitted to talk to them. 'Look straight into the camera,' he replied." Immediately after having their picture taken, the depicted individuals were either taken for hard labor or killed on the spot.8

When the pictures were found in 1979, they were not immediately displayed by the U.S. news media. Though a handful of newspapers gave the images sporadic coverage on inside pages, the pictures surfaced in other venues first—a museum space at Tuol Sleng, small touring photographic exhibits organized by United Nations officers, other museum spaces across Cambodia.9 Missing, however, from these efforts was the scope and magnitude of the Khmer Rouge atrocities. Throughout the 1980s they thus remained insufficient vehicles for enabling the public to infer what had happened.

In 1996, those circumstances changed. Only then—a full twenty years after the Pol Pot atrocities—were the photos of Tuol Sleng widely, centrally, repeatedly, and systematically circulated in the news media, a display environment that drove home the atrocities' scale, scope, and magnitude. Citing "a huge, meticulously kept archive of what came to
be known as Cambodia’s ‘bureaucracy of death,’” New York Times reporter Seth Mydans published a series of news stories on the topic, mostly on the newspaper’s front page. With each story a gallery of pictures of people about to die, similar to those depicted here, appeared.10

The first images of individuals about to die from the Khmer Rouge appeared on the Times’s front page on June 7, 1996. Under the title, “Cambodian Killers’ Careful Records Used against Them,” Mydans outlined the process by which the Khmer Rouge had meticulously “recorded the names and personal histories of thousands of prisoners who were led blindfolded . . . to be tortured and killed.”11 Illustrated by four images of people about to die, the story was immediately picked up by other news organizations, which remarked widely on the visuals. Journalists were unnerved by the frontal display of the faces they depicted. In one reporter’s view, “the faces linger in the visitor’s memory, rows and rows of mug shots taken on entry to the prison, men, women and even small children . . . Their faces show they know what is to come.”12 Another noted that the Cambodian pictures were “mute. We can never be sure what their expressions mean. Is it defiance or doom on the faces of the Cambodians? Does a frown indicate anger or confusion or concentration? The implicit message behind showing these photos . . . is precisely that the faces are so unremarkable, so indistinguishable from the rest of us. [They] could be anyone.”13 The assumption in each case, twenty years hence, was that the individuals depicted facing death were now dead. Of “16,000 people who entered Tuol Sleng, the Khmer Rouge’s secret police prison, between 1975 and 1979, perhaps seven of them emerged alive.”14 Not knowing which seven survived, of course, only enhanced the “as if ” dimension of what the photos showed. As one art critic remarked on looking at the images, “we see the dead walking.”15

The Times’s display of the images was incessant: the shots of Cambodians about to die appeared in the paper at least once every three or four weeks for nearly half a year, always in different sections. Bearing titles like “Faces from Beyond the Grave,” “Poignant Faces of the Soon-To-Be-Dead,” and “Hypnotized By Mug Shots That Stare Back,” the articles drew directly on the photographs to rekindle public interest in a story long faded from front page news.16 Stories on Tuol Sleng populated the features sections, lifestyle sections, film and book review sections as well as the sections devoted to hard news. The result was a variegated conversation about the set of photos, late to arrive but powerful nonetheless. Through it all, the images continued to reappear, haunting those who saw them.

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Unidentified Prisoner, S-21 (Tuol Sleng), c. 1975-79.
Unidentified Prisoner, 5-21 (Tual Sleng), c. 1975-79.
Within weeks of their initial display, the images literally tumbled across the front pages and broadcast spaces of other news organizations, books, films, and retrospectives. By the mid-1990s, they moved into other display venues. New exhibits of photos, more extensive than the small displays of the early 1980s, toured in the late 1990s and were shown in venues like New York City's Museum of Modern Art and Boston University's Photographic Resource Center. Large images appeared on the walls of the Tuol Sleng prison in Phnom Penh, which had been turned from a simple memory site into a full-fledged genocide museum.

Though "the idea of showing these pictures in art museums at all" was criticized on moral grounds, because "their subjects were murdered after the pictures were taken or [because] many Cambodians are still trying to discover the fate of their loved ones," the exhibits were nonetheless well attended. An online program was set up at Yale University with U.S. congressional funding to make the photographs available online so as to facilitate victim identification. Titled the Cambodian Genocide Program – available online at www.yale.edu/cgp – it scanned more than five thousand images of unidentified individuals for internet display and the program's website invited Cambodians around the world to put names to the photos. From the late 1990s onward, the photos became the topic of books, gallery exhibits, and museum retrospectives, illustrating book reviews on the Cambodian genocide, surveys of art exhibits, articles about the meaning of torture, updates on the prosecution of the Khmer Rouge leaders, discussions about the nature of photographic images, and the reporting of Pol Pot's death. Two films focused on the actions at Tuol Sleng prison, and both featured the photographs. Given that these efforts at recycling the photos took place twenty years or more after Pol Pot's atrocities, their repeated and variegated display was evidence of the images' retrospective power.

The images of Cambodians facing their death from Pol Pot were given another focused public display on two other occasions – first in the mid-2000s when the Tuol Sleng prison, which became nominally a genocide museum in 1999, drew attention as Cambodia became a favored site for "genocide tourism" or "dark tourism." Stories of tourism to the region were illustrated with pictures of tourists looking at pictures of the condemned that lined the walls of the museum: noting that the images helped remind tourists how benign the current government was when compared with the Pol Pot regime, the Boston Globe told its readers that "at Tuol Sleng, one walks across bloodstained tile to the metal bedframes where suspects were found shackled and
bloodied. To the extent that the museum’s curators offer any interpretation, it’s meant to shock.”22 As before, the reportage centered on the faces of the condemned: one reporter noted that “it is nearly impossible for visitors to escape the feeling of being watched by the faces on the walls.”23 It was not long before the lines of Cambodian mug shots filled travel websites for offbeat travel destinations and Phnom Penh travel guides.

A second event that occasioned additional visual coverage was when the tribunals for the Khmer Rouge leaders began in earnest in late 2007, after exceedingly protracted delay. Although Pol Pot himself died in 1998 — or by some reports was murdered before being turned over to prosecutors — his lieutenants went on trial for crimes against humanity nine years later.24 Although the 32-year delay meant that “accountability has been long in coming in Cambodia,” by the time the proceedings began it was clear that the images from Tuol Sleng would play a central role in the prosecutorial efforts. Photographers from the prison were called to testify in late 2007 and were photographed in the halls of pictures that lined the museum; one photographer talked of his plans to exhibit and sell his images.25

Thus, t.s. journalism’s visual display of the Khmer Rouge atrocities was a delayed and strategic relay, repeatedly focusing on impending death decades after the individuals were already dead. In this regard, the depictions functioned less as the relay of unfolding news and its reliance on timely, evidentiary and newsworthy images than as a delayed facilitator of subjunctive information for reasons other than attending to the news record. Compelling for their affective and impassioned display of approaching death, the images were used to draw public attention through the “as if” of visual representation to the prosecutorial processes underway, playing to the public’s emotions and imagination rather than rational understanding.

Atrocity and impending death

About-to-die images push a consideration of how much visual information is necessary to effectively engage with the news. In the case of Cambodian atrocity, these images, later called “incontrovertible evidence of genocide,” helped make atrocity meaningful at the same time as they spearheaded both the prosecutorial efforts against the Pol Pot regime and the identification of its victims.26 The bodily harm implicit in these photos — so frontal, dispassionate, cold, and bureaucratic that it left the depicted little dignity in their last moments alive — turned its suggestion
Unidentified Prisoner, S-21 (Tuol Sleng), c. 1975-79.
Unidentified Prisoner, S-21 (Tuol Sleng), c. 1975-79.
of intentional death into a lasting and powerful visual emblem of Khmer Rouge responsibility for war crimes.

Multiple questions arise here about whether less information provides more effective documentation, even in a news environment that does not readily admit as such. The possibility that the news of atrocity may be more compelling when the subjunctive and suggestive nature of its images pushes aside a fuller visualization of what happened raises the question of whether the "as if" of visual depiction may at times work better than journalism's fuller documentation of the "as is." If atrocity, as a particular mode of widespread violence and bodily harm, effectively captures public engagement when it utilizes a trope of visualization that draws from the imagination, the emotions and contingency to show less than what is known, it might be necessary to rethink longstanding assumptions about how journalism's imaging practices continue to rely on the "as is" of documentation.
Picturing Atrocity
Photography in Crisis

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