

## EMILY JACIR: A MODEL TO EFFECT POSITIVE CHANGE THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHY

SUSAN THOMAS

Walking into the exhibit “Material for a Film” by Emily Jacir, the first thing that meets the viewer’s eye is a repetitive panoply of bullet holes in the pages of a book. This larger-than-life book has nothing threatening about it; at first it leaves the viewer confused as to its purpose. One wanders further into the exhibit and notices more pictures of books, filling the wall. Some titles are in English and are recognizable: great classics, *Crime and Punishment*, *The Odyssey*. These were the books on Wael Zuaiter’s bookshelf the night he died. There are more pictures: a photograph of a coin Zuaiter used for the lift, a snapshot from a trip to Venice, pictures from dinner outings with his friends. There is even a film clip from his tiny role in *The Pink Panther*. There are photos of the city he lived in, notes he wrote, and shots of his apartment. We see the exact rooms in which a man once lived. Accompanying the photographs are descriptions and anecdotes from Zuaiter’s life. Proceeding through the exhibit, one feels as if he or she is walking through someone’s life. The collection of photographs provides details that inspire curiosity. Exiting the exhibit, one notices a photograph so unobtrusive that it could have been overlooked upon entrance. It is a small black and white snapshot, inconspicuous next to the larger depictions of Zuaiter’s life. Entitled simply “Roma 16 ottobre 1972,” the photograph shows Zuaiter gunned down and bleeding in a building in Rome.

The exhibit, which won the Hugo Boss Prize for contemporary art, addresses the murder of Palestinian intellectual Wael Zuatier by Israeli secret service agents after the 1972 Munich Olympic attacks. In retaliation for the Munich massacre, the Israeli government carried out assassinations of many Palestinians suspected in planning the attacks. One of the first Palestinians killed was translator Wael Zuatier, although he was never proven to have any ties with terrorists. Through “Material for a Film,” which can be seen as a mix of biography, politics, and art, Jacir makes a more effective political point through narration than through the exploitation of violent images.

The appropriate presentation of violence in media and art is a topic that has been investigated thoroughly by many writers. One of the foremost scholars on the subject is Susan Sontag. In her essay, “Looking at War,” Sontag casts doubts on the effectiveness of war photography in creating any kind of political change. She claims that basing assumptions on violent images “is to dismiss politics” (83). Sontag believes that the context of any photograph is very important for its interpretation. Without context, a violent image becomes nothing more than a “spectacle” for people to enjoy (94). She notes that “the appetite for pictures showing bodies in pain is almost as keen as the desire for ones that show bodies naked,” (82) and calls those of us who view images of suffering but cannot alleviate that suffering “voyeurs” (83). In her

conclusion, Sontag writes: “Harrowing photographs do not inevitably lose their power to shock. But they don’t help us much to understand. Narratives can make us understand” (94).

Jacir’s exhibit deftly avoids the “spectacle” aspect of photography. Almost all of the photographs that Jacir puts on display are not shocking. A photograph of a book does not grab your attention the same way the Abu Ghraib torture photographs compel you to look. Jacir does not demand that her viewer look at the images. Moreover, she offers adequate context so that the violent situations can be understood. Her one image that could be described as “shocking”—the small black and white photograph—is deemphasized in the exhibition. Rather than shocking viewers, Jacir requests their attention. This gives viewers the luxury to peruse the exhibit as they please—without the feeling of horror associated with traumatic images.

Unfortunately, news companies often rely on the “shock-value” of their images in order to garner viewers’ attention. This negative phenomenon of exploitation is outlined by Arthur Kleinman and Joan Kleinman in their essay “The Appeal of Experience; The Dismay of Images: Cultural Appropriations of Suffering in Our Times.” Like Sontag, the authors analyze the moral dilemmas faced by professional photojournalists. Sontag observes that in order to make images more “shocking” and therefore commercial, photojournalists are often tempted to compromise the “moral authority” of their pictures (92). She supports this idea with examples of many famous war photographs that were “posed.” In one Civil War photograph of Gettysburg, Sontag explains that the recently dead were moved “to a more photogenic site” to make the picture more dramatic (92). Kleinman and Kleinman observe this same phenomenon of moral exploitation as recently as 1994. In a famous Pulitzer Prize-winning photo by Kevin Carter, a starving girl is huddled on the ground in front of a vulture. While the photograph is very powerful in evoking a viewer response, Kleinman and Kleinman explain that the creation of the photograph raises ethical questions. Carter later revealed that he had waited “20 minutes, hoping the vulture would spread its wings,” before taking the photograph (Kleinman and Kleinman 5). This kind of inaction caused other journalists and Kleinman and Kleinman to question Carter’s morals. In their article, Kleinman and Kleinman wonder if he was “complicit” in the starvation when he took the time, “minutes that may have been critical at this point when she is near death, to compose an effective picture rather than save the child” (5). However, the article acknowledges that the role of a professional photojournalist is to create images that “[provide] political testimony and [drive] people to act” (6). This gets at the crux of the dilemma faced by professional photojournalists. Commercially, photographs must exploit—ethically, they cannot. Kleinman and Kleinman note that the images that receive the most fame in the media are often those that depict the greatest horror.

Given the intense demand for images of suffering, it is interesting that Jacir has succeeded professionally without relying on photographs of violence. In contrast to

Carter, Jacir did not need to involve herself in any sort of complicity when creating her images. Her approach to photography avoids the negative connotation of “exploitation” that results from violent imagery and her treatment of the material does not inspire the need for posing. Her photographs—of books, apartments, and letters—come across as honest representations of a man’s life. Instead of exploiting, Jacir uses the truthful material at hand to create her work.

Nonetheless, Jacir does not fail to make her political purpose clear. Kleinman and Kleinman define inspiring political change as the intended purpose of violent images. Sontag also believes that images are political, but violent images should only be observed by those with the power to create change. With the images in “Material for a Film,” Jacir wishes to create sympathy for a murder victim in a topical war. Her exhibit lends support to the Palestinian plight in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. More than this, it outlines a problem that this and all wars create: the death of innocent intellectuals. However, her art is more moving than reading an article about Zuaiter’s life or watching a film. Her format inspires interaction and connection with the narrative. One can walk through the exhibit without being overwhelmed with horror. It does not cause sensory overload and the violence is contextualized. Instead of a nameless victim, bloodied on the streets—you can barely see Zuaiter’s face in the picture—we know who this man is and his role in world politics. The viewer fully understands the tragic loss of an intellectual mind because of the Israel-Palestinian conflict.

In addition to the voyeuristic and exploitative problems associated with violent photographs, Sontag proposes that too much exposure to violent imagery can be “desensitizing” (Sontag 97). Flooded with shocking images, Sontag argues that “we are losing our capacity to react” (Sontag 97). Kleinman and Kleinman further note the highly disturbing problem of how the media often unintentionally perpetuates the horrors they are trying to prevent. They cite the example of a news article using a picture of a child prostitute that “appeals...to a prurient sensibility” (Kleinman and Kleinman 11). In making this photograph marketable, the media is appealing to the same love of violence and sexuality that caused the photograph to be made.

Jacir goes out of her way to contextualize the violence she presents. With only one violent image, Jacir does not desensitize her viewer, nor does she perpetuate the violence she is condemning. By not relying on shock value and by accompanying her violent image with others that offer insight into the situation, Jacir inspires sympathy and understanding—until one does condemn the violence that is presented. Though Sontag might cite all the problems associated with violent imagery as reasons to discredit the use of violent photography, Kleinman and Kleinman are quick to point out that this does not imply that the documentation of violence should be avoided. They write that “the possibility of moral appeal through images of human misery,” means that their absence causes “existential dismay” (16). To them, there is a fine line between documentation and exploitation. There should be no doubt that violent

images are necessary in our society. These images show the ugly truth of things we might not wish to contemplate. The fact that violence exists should not be suppressed, but such imagery should not be used as pornography for the masses. Citizens should neither be encouraged nor forced to look at images that are nothing more than a series of horrors with little context. Jacir's model walks this line admirably.

While not relying on the seduction of violent imagery, Jacir's exhibit is nevertheless very successful in conveying its political message. The effectiveness of Jacir's exhibit can be seen as a result of its narrative form. Just as Sontag predicts that "a narrative seems more likely to be effective than an image" (98), Jacir's narrative is more effective than any multitude of violent images. In contemporary representations of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, viewers are often presented with scenes of soldiers marching through towns, or the aftermath of a suicide bombing. Instead of brief, shocking images, Jacir gives us deeper understanding of the results of such conflict. What is inspiring is that the exhibit contradicts Sontag's argument that "No photograph, or portfolio of photographs" (98) can go further than a moving film about the horrors of war. Though Sontag believes that photographs cannot create understanding, the main medium of Jacir's exhibit is photography. And her photographs do create empathy.

The conductors of the experiment "Chinese Village Women as Visual Anthropologists: A Participatory Approach to Reaching Policymakers" would not be surprised at the ability of photographs to convey narrative meaning. Caroline Wang, Mary Ann Burris, and Xiang Yue Ping demonstrates the power of the photo "novella" form within politics. Their anthropological experiment gave rural Chinese women cameras in order to document the women's health issues and spur change in a male-dominated society. The format of the "photo novella" in this experiment was chosen because "The essence of photo novella is to avoid the voyeuristic quality that often characterizes professional photojournalists' work" (Wang 1393). When the photos went on public display, the experimenters noticed that common people, officials, and the media were all interested in viewing the work. They wrote: "The 'human interest' strength of photo novella fires the attention of the media, too, as demonstrated by the attendance of national and local press at the Chengjiang County opening" (1394). Their novella format aroused interest and curiosity within the larger population, especially because it dealt with daily life. As a result of the photographs, policy changes were enacted in the village to provide more health care for women and better daycare services. Like the experiment, Jacir uses a type of novella to "put a human face on the data" (1395). Her photographs become narratives as they take us through Zuaite's day-to-day life. Their human qualities draw the viewer in and allow him or her to better connect to the information being presented.

The mainstream media, so often plagued with the problems inherent in violent imagery, could perhaps benefit from looking at Jacir's model of presentation. To sell, the media does not always need to shock us. It does not need to perpetuate the brief

looks at violence that result in voyeurism instead of effecting change. Instead, the media needs to do as thorough a job as Jacir has done with her work. Finding personal stories and presenting the spectrum of lives of others is a more lasting means of communication. While the creation of violent imagery should not be suppressed and nothing should prevent documentation, we must remember the reason for this imagery in the first place. To prevent violence, and to make political change, violent imagery should give us a profound and comprehensive understanding of world events.

In the caption to photographs of the pages of the bullet-ridden book, we learn that this was Zuaiteer's copy of *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights*. Zuaiteer, who was fluent in English, Arabic, Italian and French, wished to translate this book from Arabic to Italian. He was working on the project when he was assassinated. One of the bullets lodged into the spine of the book that he was carrying that night. To this day, a direct translation from Arabic to Italian of *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights* does not exist. No violent photograph could depict intelligence gunned down as effectively as a simple picture of a bullet in a book.

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## WORKS CITED

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