

# The Ethics of Spectatorship: *War Photographer* and the Politics of Viewing Violence

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**OPEN ACCESS**

Volume: 12

Special Issue: 4

Month: May

Year: 2025

E-ISSN: 2582-0397

P-ISSN: 2321-788X

Citation:

KS, Manoj Kumar, and Monika S. B. "The Ethics of Spectatorship: War Photographer and the Politics of Viewing Violence." *Shanlax International Journal of Arts, Science and Humanities*, vol. 12, no. S4, 2025, pp. 140–43.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34293/sijash.v12iS4.May-9171>

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## Abstract

Carol Ann Duffy's *War Photographer* terrifyingly examines the ethical values of spectatorship and the political morality of screening violence, offering tragic interpretation on the part of media in shaping civic perception of war. This paper explores the ethical dilemma inborn in war photography, curious in the ways in which photograph of anguish are consumed, processed, and over and over again overlooked through far-away audiences. Throughout the poem's structured meticulousness, depressing metaphors, and tonal shifts, Duffy highlights the expressive and psychological load carried by those who document difference of opinion, contrasting it with the lack of interest of those who simply observe from a position of insensitivity.

The poem highlights the tension between experiencing war firsthand and seeing it via mediated representation by presenting the war photographer as both an observer and an outsider. This study investigates the commodification of torment, the aestheticization of violence, and the function of visual media in determining narratives of inconsistency. The analysis additionally interrogates how the act of viewing violence influences public sense of right and wrong and ethical conscientiousness. In due course, *War Photographer* serves as a prevailing analysis of passive spectatorship, urging a reassessment of how war and human suffering are professed in present-day society. In a society where media is pervasive, this study adds to larger discussions about ethics, war representation, and the relationship between art and ethics.

**Keywords:** War Photography, Spectatorship, Ethics of Witnessing, Media Representation, Poetry and Conflict, Carol Ann Duffy, War Photographer, Violence in Poetry, Moral Responsibility, Visual Culture

## Introduction

War photography and visual media engage in recreation of a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of hostility and conflict. The moral implications of witnessing suffering through mediated images raise important questions about spectatorship, responsibility, and empathy. Carol Ann Duffy's *War Photographer* offers a compelling critique of the detached manner in which war and human suffering are consumed by distant audiences. This paper explores the poem's engagement with the ethics of viewing violence, the commodification of suffering, and the moral dilemmas of war representation.

In the fields of media studies and ethics, there has been much discussion on the connection between war, photography, and spectatorship. Throughout history, photographs have been used as both propaganda and documentary tools. Although they have the capacity to evoke empathy, they run the risk of simplifying intricate human suffering to just artistic creations. As a result, this study expands its research to include wider implications in public duty, journalistic ethics, and visual culture.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This research examines War Photographer using ideas of visual culture, media ethics, and spectatorship. Susan Sontag's discussion of "witnessing" in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003) sheds light on how photography is used to depict conflict. Sontag contends that exposing viewers to pictures of suffering on a regular basis might cause desensitization, turning them into passive recipients of information rather than proactive participants in international problems. The topic of how pictures are used to generate meaning is also influenced by John Berger's views on seeing and visual culture, especially those found in *Ways of Seeing* (1972). His claim that photos are frequently altered to support particular viewpoints is consistent with worries on the moral obligations of combat photographers.

The precarious life of Judith Butler (2004) is also related to the discussions about the illegal life of certain lives for others. Representative policy, especially among representatives of war media, often determine which victim is considered to be worthy of public grief and being overlooked.

Butler's argument that the media shaped public awareness about the painful questions increased the depth of the dialogue of war photographer.

Furthermore, the ethical responsibilities of photographers and journalists are analyzed in light of professional rules of conduct, such as those established by the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) and the National Press Photographers Association (NPPA). These rules place a strong emphasis on responsibility, truthfulness, and harm minimization—principles that are commonly contested in war reporting.

### **Analysis of War Photographer**

Duffy's war photographer presented a painful portrait of a war photographer when he treated the painful image. The accuracy of the structure of the poem, with its rigid quatrain and its control diagrams, reflects the photographer's efforts to order the chaos of war. The use of dark and worrying images highlights the weight of the mission.

Poems and positioning photographers are both a fellow practitioner and a stranger.

He witnessed the first battle but eventually returned to a world that was still indifferent to his work. This double view highlights the moral burden of war photography - the photographer must record the suffering while attacking the knowledge that his audience may still be sensitive.

The "eyeball of the reader shakes/with tears between the bath and the lunch beer" emphasizes the nature of the empathy in a saturated media society.

Used by Duffy of religious and sacrifices ("A priest is about to sing a Mass") to increase the role of the photographer on a reluctant martyr, emphasizing the moral weight of the profession.

The contrast between his conscientious commitment to the battle and passive consumption of the images of the public criticized the morality of the audience.

In addition, the psychological impact on war photographers is an area of interest.

Many journalists and photographers suffer from stress disorder after injury (SSPT) because they are exposed to extreme violence. The exquisite poem refers to this burden by describing the photographer as an isolated character, obsessed with the images he has taken. This increases

the moral concerns about the responsibility of the media organizations to provide psychological support for those who record the war.

### **Comparison with Wilfred Owen's Dulce et Decorum Est**

A useful comparison can be set between war photography and the famous war poem by Wilfred Owen, *Dulce et Decorum Est*. While the war photographer criticized the passive audience of the image of the war, Owen's poem condemned the honor of the war. *Dulce et Decorum* is present with an unproven internal representative of the horror of war, especially through the graphic image of a gas attack:

"If you can hear, with each shock, blood/blood of the details of the corrupt lungs against foam.

The audience is far away. The two poets criticized the separation between the reality of the war and the way it was felt, but from different angles.

*Dulce et Decorum* of Owen is directly challenging the patriotic ideology that the war is noble, instead of revealing its brutal nature and personality. Duffy, on the other hand, asks questions about how the war was recovered and consumed by the representative of the media, asking questions about the morality of the conversion of suffering into consumption images. Together, these poems provide a broader comment on the morality of the representation of the war - whether through literature or visual media.

### **Media, War, and Public Conscience**

The role of the media in the formation of war stories is deeply related to the morality of the image of violence. War photography has long been a powerful tool to affect public opinion, but it also increases concerns about sensationalism, sensitivity, and suffering goods.

The problem of morality when knowing whether to show or retain graphics about violence is a persistent debate in the press.

Photos of the Vietnam War, Rwandan genocide, and Syrian refugee crisis played a central role in forming public speech. However, their effects vary depending on the political and social context they receive. Some images cause immediate action, while other images are part of the overwhelming flow of visual vehicles, losing their strength. Duffy's war photographer criticized this phenomenon, showing that the modern public is committed to suffering.

The aesthetics of war photography complicated its moral position. The painful image is often framed in a way that emphasizes the composition and artistic value, sometimes clarifying the reality of the people behind them. The balance between narration and exploitation is a good line that many war photographers have to navigate.

### **Conclusion**

*War Photographer* serves as a profound commentary on the ethics of spectatorship, urging a reconsideration of how war and suffering are perceived in contemporary society. The poem challenges audiences to move beyond passive consumption and engage with violence and conflict in a manner that acknowledges moral responsibility. By interrogating the role of media in shaping public conscience, this research contributes to broader discussions on war representation, morality, and the politics of witnessing in a visually dominated world.

The research underscores that while war photography is an essential tool for raising awareness, it must be approached with ethical sensitivity. Media consumers, journalists, and policymakers must engage critically with images of suffering to ensure that they lead to meaningful action rather than passive observation. By revisiting the ethical obligations of both photographers and audiences, this study highlights the need for a more conscientious approach to war representation in the digital age.

Future research could explore the intersection of digital media and war representation, particularly with the rise of social media platforms. The instantaneous nature of digital images presents new challenges regarding verification, context, and emotional impact. Understanding how contemporary audiences engage with war photography in an era of algorithm-driven content curation is crucial to advancing discussions on ethics and spectatorship.

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