



DEATH IN LIFE/LIFE IN DEATH: TWO FILM IMAGES OF ATROCITY

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Abstract

*This study explores the unique visual metaphor of living victims of atrocity being posed as dead victims of atrocity, and vice versa. The films in question are the 2011 U.S./Chinese feature film *The Flowers of War* and an episode from the 1963 U.S. television series *Combat!* The argument is that the visual metaphor confusing the living with the dead is a unique method of depicting atrocity in a manner that circumvents the difficulty of absorbing the images in a single glance. The argument invokes the work of Judith Butler and Michel Foucault as well as the nature of the blended metaphor as described by the cognitive scientists Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner.*

Keywords: Visual Metaphor, Judith Butler, Gilles Fauconnier, Michel Foucault, Nanjing Massacre, Nazi Holocaust, Susan Sontag, Mark Turner

Introduction

The 1963 *Combat!* The episode “Gideon’s Army” and the 2011 feature film *The Flowers of War* may be widely separated by time and genre, but they are nevertheless remarkably similar in their visual exploration of atrocity. I do not choose the word “exploration” lightly, because both works exemplify the manner in which we train our eyes to view events that cannot easily be absorbed in a single glance. In both cases, the image is one that blurs the distinction between the living and dead victims. I argue that the concept may be better understood through the response of Judith Butler to Susan Sontag in the Butler’s *Frames of War*, Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner in their work on blended metaphors, and lastly, in Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* (1995). Granted, multiple theoretical angles may seem top-loaded in a discipline that normally prefers that one “choose one’s metric,” as the physicist says. However, the ultimate question that I hope to address is whether the blending of living and dead imagery has the power to impact the viewer or reader’s ability to grasp the plight of innocent victims of war.

As for contemporary scholarship on the two works, I will begin with an overview of scholarly work on “Gideon’s Army.” Unsurprisingly, for a single episode of a television series, the literature is quite sparse. In fact, I can find only a single article on Google Scholar, which is an overview of the entire series and other war-themed television series rather than a directed reading of the episode itself. The 1998 article, by Rick Worland, briefly mentions that “Gideon’s Army” in part concerns “the moral conundrum of prisoners who collaborated to survive” (Worland 6). *Flowers of War*, also not surprisingly, is much more substantially represented in the literature, although most critics have focused on the feminist theme rather than the nature of its employment of visual metaphor. Representative is Yunita Sulaiman and Susanne A.H. Sitohang’s “A Portrayal of Suffering Women at War in Zhang Yimou’s *The Flowers of War*” (2019). Jincai Yang’s 2015 article “Reading Ethics and the Body in Geling Yan’s *The Flowers of War*” focuses on both the film and the novel on which it is based. Moreover, Yang employs a discussion of Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* to argue that readers (and presumably viewers) “read the body as a realm of meaning and follow the ways the Chinese characters, including the prostitutes of the Qin Huai River brothels teach

us to read it” (571). Likewise, Wanyi Gan’s “The Flowers of War and the Male Gaze” (2024) concerns gender and sexual identity.

Given the relative scholarly obscurity of each work, I will begin with an overview. “Gideon’s Army” and *The Flowers of War* are depictions of two central events in World War II – the Nazi Holocaust and the Nanjing Massacre, respectively. The December 1963 *Combat!* episode “Gideon’s Trumpet” employs the use of dead soldiers propped up as armed combatants in a Nazi concentration-camp building, while the 2011 Chinese/American film *The Flowers of War* depicts a group of Nanjing prostitutes who volunteer to masquerade as schoolgirls by receiving makeup and hair-styling from a mortician who knows only how to work on them if they lie on a table as if they are corpses. Remarkably, both works draw the reader’s attention to the human body as an entity that must be considered in both its living and dead states. In Michel Foucault’s (1985) words, the ultimate goal of observation is knowable man (soul, individuality, consciousness, conduct, whatever it is called) is the object-effect of this analytical investment, of this domination-observation. My argument is that the “knowable victim” requires both an inspection of all the aforementioned, but with the addition of an observed state of non-being. Film is, especially, sensitive to this duality in confronting situations with which it has not heretofore dealt – to wit, the deaths of millions of Jewish victims in the Nazi concentration camps, and the deaths of some 300,000 in the rampage that took place in the early days of the war in Nanjing.

However, the ability to absorb representative imagery relating to the Holocaust and the Nanjing Massacre is challenging in part because a limited narrative on the screen is obliged to represent death on an enormous and overwhelming scale. For this reason, the portrayal of dead prisoners and soldiers as living combatants, and conversely, living women as cadavers being prepared in order to masquerade as schoolgirls to be slaughtered, gains a certain amount of coherence from the blended metaphor. The necessity is for us to readjust our gaze to encompass and attempt to take cognitive control of the events in our purview, as Foucault (1995) has explained in *Discipline and Punish*, by arriving at the “means of correct training.” Foucault is primarily describing the manner in which troops are brought into discipline and military uniformity in order to bring social control to a nominal and economical ideal, and describes at length an obscure historical event in which Louis XIV ordered a military parade in 1666 depicted by a commemorative coin some years later. As Foucault explains, the exergue of the coin reads “Disciplina militaris restitua” (military discipline restored), while the legend reads “Prolusion ad victorias” (prelude to victory). The imposition of such military rigor was so striking, Foucault adds, that “Grand Duke Mikhail once remarked of a regiment, after having kept it for one hour presenting arms, ‘only they breathe’” (Foucault, 1995).

Foucault offers no interpretation of Mikhail’s words, but an extension of the visual metaphor to my own argument is that the troops are so amenable to observation that they are almost like cadavers that can be examined at will by the forensic specialist. On the next page, Foucault likens the military review to the modern observation of medical patients in clinics, which leads the reader to the conclusion that the structure of military discipline and the meticulous procedures of medical examination – and probably other venues of social interaction as well – are brought into greater efficiency if there is a standardization of phenomena for the human gaze to perceive. We humans examine things more efficiently if the examining environment is regularized, and we regularize things more efficiently by the imposition of power. To see is to control, and to control is to see.

Foucault’s topic in *Discipline and Punish* is primarily the historical development of modern means of coercing recalcitrant individuals into social conformity, but I believe that his analysis of the Louis XIV coin is also applicable to a more passive form of control in which we “discipline” our eyes to the attainment of information, particularly regarding film. Therefore, I would like to suggest that his “exergue/legend” reading can be applied to film depictions of two central events in World War II – the Nazi Holocaust and

the Nanjing Massacre – and further, that the reading both sides of the coin simultaneously is a bit easier with the blended metaphor. Before proceeding to a reading of the two films, it is first necessary to further explain what is meant by the terms “blended metaphor” and “conceptual blending.”

Originated by cognitive scientists Mark Turner and Gilles Fauconnier in their 2002 book, *The Way We Think*, conceptual blending is the notion that we humans can make impressive intellectual strides by combining metaphors to arrive at new insights. To explain how this works, Turner describes in a 2014 follow-up book, *The Origin of Ideas*, a logic puzzle in which the reader must determine whether a Buddhist monk will be in exactly the same place at the same time if he climbs a mountain one morning and returns by the same path the next morning, regardless of his speed on either trip.

Turner describes the puzzle in significant detail because, as he explains, the solution is fairly difficult for most individuals. Surely, most of us think, the monk cannot possibly be in one spot on two successive days if he is free to make the trip at his own pace, even if he is obliged to begin at the same time on two successive mornings and finish the journey before nightfall. However, the solution is far simpler for most of us if we envision the monk “meeting himself” in a blending of the two separate trips as if they were occurring simultaneously. With this image in mind, it becomes considerably easier to see that the monk will indeed “meet himself” at a specific place and at a specific moment, regardless of how slow or how fast he makes either journey (Turner, 2014)¹.

What I therefore suggest is that Foucault’s panoptical view is indeed important in the viewer’s ability to absorb the overwhelming import of the Nazi Holocaust and the Nanjing Massacre, and moreover, that both film depictions interestingly elected to employ the blended visual metaphor of the living and dead victim of atrocity to aid the visualization. This was an efficacious tack in both instances because the film and television industries were rather late, respectively, in arriving at depictions of the two events. In the case of the Holocaust, moviegoers were already familiar with the slaughter of Jewish Europeans because of the award-winning 1959 film *The Diary of Anne Frank*, but the action in the film takes place in a confined indoor space in the center of Amsterdam, where the gripping fear on the part of the families in hiding is the only means of conveying what the Nazis were capable of doing in the camps themselves. The miniseries *The Holocaust* also garnered considerable attention, and this time depicted the slaughter itself on the television screen, but not until 1978, when the camps had already been closed down by Allied troops and the killing unilaterally terminated for 33 years. A few other films in the two decades following the war broached Holocaust themes, including the underrated 1962 feature film *The Inspector*, but it was apparently the television series *Combat!* that first brought the death camps into the family living room.²

¹ Turner explains on p. 16 that the anecdote is from Karl Duncker’s “On Problem Solving,” which appeared in *Psychological Monographs* in 1945. The anecdote was further analyzed by Arthur Koestler in his 1964 book *The Act of Creation*, Turner adds.

² This statement may ultimately prove to be inaccurate, but I have not found evidence of a pre-1963 TV series that set an episode in a Nazi concentration camp. According to Wikipedia.com’s “List of World War II Television Series” page, the American forerunners of *Combat!* included *Combat Sergeant*, which was set in North Africa; *The Silent Service*, which concerned submarine warfare; and *Navy Log*. The short-lived ABC series *The Gallant Men* began the same year as *Combat!*, but judging from the synopses available at the IMDBb.com site, the series was set in Italy

Combat! appeared weekly on ABC from 1962 to 1967, and made only one venture into a Holocaust-related theme during its network run (*Combat!*, Gideon's). Typically, the weekly episodes concerned the battlefield exploits of a squad of American infantrymen immediately following the D-Day landing.³ But that one episode, "Gideon's Army," is an especially noteworthy exploration of the continuing emphasis of the series – the extent to which an ordinary but earnest and resourceful individual can contribute to a greater good. In the case of "Gideon's Army," this "everyman" motif is extended to make a compelling argument that regular people, given the opportunity, can do some small part to minimize a human tragedy in the making, even if they are powerless to prevent it. noteworthy exploration of the continuing emphasis of the series – the extent to which an ordinary but earnest and resourceful individual can contribute to a greater good. In the case of "Gideon's Army," this "everyman" motif is extended to make a compelling argument that regular people, given the opportunity, can do some small part to minimize a human tragedy in the making, even if they are powerless to prevent it.

The episode is also arguably a noteworthy exploration of the "everyman" theme within the context of the American ethos of the early 1960s. Originally telecast on Dec. 31, 1963—only weeks after the assassination of John F. Kennedy—the episode is in keeping with the standard that Kennedy set for his country because it rhetorically questions the abilities of a single person to have an impact on large-scale events, and even goes further than Kennedy's enjoinder to "ask what you can do for your country" by extending the question to encompass the most vulnerable and abused individuals and groups in the world. In sum, the episode addresses what one person can do for humanity, even when he or she has very little power or authority and must rely on the clever management of information in a chaotic world.⁴

In the episode, Sgt. Saunders (portrayed by Vic Morrow) and a small squad of U.S. Army infantry soldiers consisting of a medic, a BAR man, and three other privates armed with M1 Garand rifles, come upon a Nazi concentration camp as they patrol the area on an unrelated mission. Neither they nor their superior officers, nor even the German foot soldiers they later encounter, know anything about the camp,

and did not broach the topic of the death camps. The BBC produced a series titled *O.S.S.* in 1956-57, but the synopses of the 26 episodes available at imdb.com do not suggest that any involved the death camps. The 1957 BBC production *Escape* focused all six of its episodes on "escapes from German prisoner of war camps," according to IMDb.com, which adds that "As usual for the period, it was transmitted live; no recordings are known to survive" ("Escape").

³ The very first *Combat!* episode, "Forgotten Front," depicted the squad landing on Normandy Beach on June 6, 1944. Encountering fairly light resistance, the squad progresses into the interior of France, and little if any mention is subsequently made of the D-Day landing either in the first episode or in any subsequent episode during the five-year run. Though the series was telecast for five seasons, all the actions can be presumed to have taken place in the first three or four months after the landing, considering that a winter scene was never telecast, nor was any mention apparently made of the Battle of the Bulge in the winter of 1944-45.

⁴ Further elaboration on the role of U.S. military forces in the liberation of the death camps is beyond the scope of this essay. Anyone interested in the topic is urged to read history professor Robert Abzug's 1985 book *Inside the Vicious Heart*.

and certainly the American soldiers do not know that civilian prisoners from Eastern Europe are being exterminated. After entering the camp with no resistance, they discover a handful of injured and ill-nourished prisoners, one dying of shrapnel wounds he received when Allied bombers inadvertently dropped ordnance inside the camp's perimeter. The American soldiers are told that the Nazi guards abandoned the camp when they became aware that Allied infantry were approaching, and then marched the ambulatory prisoners away in order to relocate them in another concentration camp. The prisoners left behind, the Americans are told, were too ill to be moved, but managed to avoid being shot due to the hasty and chaotic Nazi retreat.

Saunders is determined to save the civilian prisoners and talks his superiors back at headquarters into letting him protect them until they can be transported to safety. But with only a handful of men and very limited help available from the ill and injured civilian prisoners, his chances of holding off approaching German forces are bleak. Saunders, who is portrayed throughout the series as an "everyman" from a working-class background, but also as a shrewd and resourceful tactician, is once again confronted with the dilemma of finding a workable solution in the face of seemingly impossible odds. The difference this time is that the best solution that he can possibly offer to the liberated prisoners is the least terrible of various bad outcomes. Most of the civilian prisoners have already been exterminated, and for Saunders, the struggle this time is not to win a perimeter firefight, but to bring an end to the killing that has already left almost no survivors.

When the American soldiers manage to capture a German sergeant, the man is so overwhelmed by the sight of the prisoners that he blurts out the information he possesses about Nazi troop strength in the area. Saunders thereby learns that about 40 Nazi infantrymen are poised for an assault on the camp, which would more than overwhelm his band of four armed men and the couple of prisoners who are able-bodied enough to handle a gun. However, Saunders manages to come up with a plan that is audacious enough to possibly succeed. Gathering the bodies of dead prisoners and propping them in the many windows of the main camp building, Sanders and his men place extra firearms as well as sticks and brooms in their hands to appear as if they are armed combatants. From a distance, Saunders hopes, the dead civilians will make the camp look as if it is heavily armed by Allied liberators, and the effect will be enhanced by the six or seven armed men firing heavily as soon as the Nazi troops come into view. With any luck the Nazi infantry, already knowing that camp has been evacuated, will assume that the facility has been taken over by the enemy and that further engagement is pointless.

Expecting an advanced scouting party, Saunders instructs his men before the firefight begins to kill all of the party except one, who will be permitted to escape so that he can report to his superiors that the 40 Germans in the area will not succeed in a subsequent firefight. The survivor from the scouting party is duly convinced, not only because he has heard a significant amount of firing, but also because Saunders and his cohorts have propped dead bodies in all the windows to leave the impression that the camp is heavily defended. This action, as Doc points out to the BAR man Kirby, is essentially how Gideon overcame the Midianites in the Old Testament book of *Judges* – hence the title of the episode. Like Gideon, Saunders has made a significant amount of "noise"—albeit in this case with guns and dead bodies rather than with trumpets—in order to convince the enemy that their defeat is inevitable. And like Gideon, Saunders accepts no credit for his resourcefulness and heroism, but merely walks away from the scene of the carnage after the surviving civilians have been escorted to safety.

The dead bodies propped in the windows, therefore, serve as a plot mechanism to heighten the dramatic tension, and to once again showcase the shrewdness and resourcefulness of Sgt. Saunders, but I argue that it also invests the reader with not only a sense of how a relatively powerless individual can do or her part in minimizing atrocity, but also of how a privileged view of events can place the observer in a unique situation in which information entropy is reversed. It is the chaos of war and thus the inadequacy

of information that has kept the Allies from knowing about the extermination of European Jewish populations, and it is the chaos of war and inadequacy of information that allows a subterfuge such as the propping of dead bodies to succeed. Further, it is the blending of the visual sight of a live combatant and a corpse that allows the viewer to transcend the information entropy.

What is not so obvious is that the confusion of the living and the dead makes an additional impression on the viewer that underscores the general *Combat!* theme of the everyman doing his small part to confront atrocity. The blended metaphor of the living and dead victims provides a means of visualizing both the tragedy and pointlessness of their deaths, with the image of their continuing as functioning human beings who have managed to escape the carnage. Stipulating that “Gideon’s Army” shows how the efforts of one American sergeant can lead to a positive humanitarian and military outcome if one knows how to work within the information-exchange system, the imagery of the episode silently underscores the reality that one can better comprehend what is at stake if both success and failure are amalgamated in a single visual representation. The fact that individuals of comparatively modest empowerment can figure out how to make a difference in society is a good example of the ethos of the early 1960s, when Americans had a great deal of optimism that everyone could figure out a way to solve many seemingly intractable problems. However, “Gideon’s Army” possesses an ongoing value in confronting the viewer with a more comprehensive understanding of the brutalities of extermination.

Likewise, *The Flowers of War* represents a visual interpretation of an event that may be 88 years old at the time of this writing, but is still an atrocity that cannot be fully comprehended. As in the case of the liberation of the Nazi camps, the details of the Nanjing Massacre are beyond the scope of this essay, so I will suggest that anyone wishing to investigate the history further can do no better than read Iris Chang’s groundbreaking 1997 book *The Rape of Nanking*.⁵ However, I will stipulate that I employ throughout this essay the figure of 300,000 Chinese deaths in Nanjing in the latter part of 1937, although the precise figure is not and probably can never be known accurately.

I should also stipulate that the Nanjing Massacre remains a matter of serious contention, particularly in Asia. Again, I do not particularly want to get into the details beyond pointing out that some of the disagreement seems to focus on the question of whether certain Chinese troops were wearing civilian clothing.⁶ Be that as it may, one would be at pains to argue that 14 Chinese schoolgirls trained only to sing religious songs at the local Roman Catholic Church, or 14 career prostitutes who are trained only to sing sentimental ballads to their customers and perform sexual favors, would pose any paramilitary threat to fully-armed Japanese infantry soldiers. And these are the protagonists of *The Flowers of War*, Zhang Yimou’s 2011 film based on the historical fiction of the same name by the Chinese novelist Yan Geling.

The film concerns an American mortician, John Miller, who happens to arrive in Nanjing at the time of the Japanese invasion so that he can embalm the body of the local priest, Father Ingleman, who has

⁵ For those unfamiliar with the systems of Romanizing Chinese characters, “Nanking” was the typical representation in English for quite some time, but has now been largely displaced by the Pinyin spelling “Nanjing.” I use the spelling “Nanjing” because Pinyin is more dominant these days, and also because the “j” sound, to my admittedly untrained ear, sounds more like the actual Chinese pronunciation.

⁶ The Wikipedia article “Nanjing Massacre,” for example, cites Yoshiaki Itakura’s 1999 book on the massacre (p. 11) as stating that “[the] number of Chinese soldiers in plain clothes that were executed are estimated to be around 4000.”

died of natural causes. Miller arrives to discover the city in ruins with active gunfire imperiling his safety, so he decides that his best recourse is to retreat to his original destination – the church itself, which will presumably not be destroyed by the Japanese troops if they wish to avoid further international condemnation.

Once inside the church grounds, he is told by the priest's adopted 13-year-old son, a Chinese orphan who goes by the name "George Chen," that an artillery shell had landed directly on top of the priest's temporary grave, completely obliterating the body. With no work left to do, Miller indulges himself in the church's wine supply (the parish earning much of its operating revenue by bottling and selling wine). However, he soon finds that his new task is to protect George and the 14 schoolgirls who are hiding in the church.

Shortly thereafter, 14 prostitutes from the Qin Huai River district of Nanjing jump the church wall to take refuge, now leaving 29 individuals desperate for any protection that Miller can provide as an American "neutral." Two of the schoolgirls and two of the prostitutes are soon murdered by marauding Japanese soldiers, and Miller – now masquerading as the parish priest in hopes of gaining even greater protection against the Japanese – discovers his moral backbone and resolves to save as many lives as possible. He manages to get the parish truck working, but the arrival of high-ranking Japanese officials further complicates his escape plans by demanding that the 13 girls (one of the prostitutes inadvertently walking into the chorister while the girls are performing) give a concert at Japanese headquarters the following day.

Knowing that the Japanese soldiers have been raping and slaughtering women throughout the attack, the 12 surviving prostitutes volunteer to have themselves disguised as the schoolgirls – a ruse that will presumably work long enough for Miller to escape Nanjing with the 12 girls hiding in the truck. Because the Japanese have counted 13, George volunteers to have himself disguised as the thirteenth girl, and Miller goes to work cutting the hair of the prostitutes and applying heavy makeup to make them look like younger schoolgirls. Notably, he is most comfortable doing cosmetic work on corpses, so he has the 12 women and George lie on slats as if they are being embalmed. Lastly, he fashions a wig for George, and the group is then loaded into a Japanese transport by Japanese soldiers and driven away to face almost certain death. Miller, still masquerading as the parish priest, drives the wine-delivery truck through the enemy checkpoint with the girls hiding in the truck bed, and after bribing the guards with a few cases of wine, escapes to the countryside. The VoiceOver provided by one of the surviving girls notes that no one ever discovered what happened to the 12 women and George, but that the schoolgirls had successfully survived the Nanjing Massacre.

I have provided a significant plot synopsis of the film in large part to address what the great critic Roger Ebert considered a plot-hole in the film. In his January 18, 2012, review of the film, Ebert awards a mediocre two of four stars, beginning and ending his article with a criticism of the use of the Western character John Miller in the lead role. His main concern is the practice of producing "a film about non-white people and find[ing] a way, however convoluted, to tell it from the point of view of a white character." Ebert (2012) concludes with a series of rhetorical questions: « Now let me ask you: Can you think of any reason the character John Miller is needed to tell his story? Was any consideration given to the possibility of a Chinese priest? Would that be asking for too much?"

Admittedly, I have now had more than a decade to ponder the film since viewing it for the first time in Guangzhou, whereas Ebert was pressed into writing a quick consumer-minded critique in probably a few days. Nevertheless, I think I can provide a plausible explanation that goes to the heart of my thesis. The Western mortician John Miller (portrayed by the actor Christian Bale) was indeed necessary to emphasize the very horror of extermination that I take as my main point in this essay. I suppose the film could have featured a Chinese mortician, but importing one from a faraway locale for the purpose of

embalming the parish priest would make little sense, given that Nanjing was a peaceful and prosperous city with its own morticians until the Japanese unilaterally elected to invade it in the Second Sino-Japanese War. Besides, a Chinese mortician would have not been able to negotiate with the Japanese soldiers as would an American from a still-neutral country in 1937. If anything, the Chinese mortician would have been taken out and summarily shot, as would, presumably, a Chinese priest. And finally, one theme of *The Flowers of War* is misrecognition, which is paradigmatically supported by the necessity of the central character experiencing his own “learning curve” as an outsider.

I believe, rather, that a Western mortician is crucial to the cinematic vision that Zhang Yimou wishes to convey in that only through such a plot device are we credibly able to view a group of soon-to-be-victims of atrocity in the attitude of death while still alive. The viewer is fully informed that Miller enjoys a limited amount of protection because he is a foreigner from a still-neutral country (the action taking place some four years before Pearl Harbor). He gains even further protection by masquerading as a foreign priest, so another essay could easily delve into the aesthetics of *The Flowers of War* as a meditation on appearance versus reality. After all, 14 individuals are in masquerade in the film, and one of them is a young adolescent boy disguised as a girl.

However, I would suggest that the masquerades are primarily a plot device aimed at bringing a resolution to the hostage crisis. The application of makeup by a qualified mortician, then, is aimed – consciously or unconsciously – at providing the viewer with the opportunity of seeing the victims as they would appear if dead. The fact that Miller works on all 12 women and George simultaneously also means that the “dead bodies” are lined up together on makeshift pallets, further underscoring the grim reminder that the victims of the massacre were once living beings. True, we see bodies scattered literally throughout Nanjing at various points in the film, but the image of the victims in the state that they will quickly assume because of their sacrifice for the schoolgirls adds a poignancy that is quite different from images of bodies in the streets, even though the latter are quite grim in themselves.

In short, the blending of images, both dead and living, is a means of referring to that which cannot be adequately conveyed by any director in any artistic representation – namely, the slaughter of 300,000 innocent victims. To see a slightly different representation of this concept, we may also consider another film of the Nanjing Massacre – *City of Life and Death* – which does not blend the images of the living and the dead as does *The Flowers of War* or “Gideon’s War,” but nonetheless culminates with an exploration of the borderline between life and death of two minor characters, as the film’s title suggests. The two characters in question are a man and a boy who are herded to a site where they are to be executed, only to be released by a Japanese officer who has suddenly been overcome by guilt for his actions during the Nanjing Massacre. As the two walk across the field to freedom, they suddenly hear a gunshot and, in panic, check to see if either has been shot in the back. In fact, the Japanese officer has shot himself, and when the two former prisoners realize that they are unharmed, they resume their departure in a final freeze-frame. The viewer therefore cannot know the fate of the two until the credits role with the information that the boy had survived the war and was in fact still alive at the time of the filming.

The “Gideon’s War” episode of *Combat!* and *The Flowers of War* are thus remarkable in their visual similarity in combining the image of the living victim and the murdered victim. In both cases, the disguise of the dead as living soldiers and the living women as dead bodies are plot devices that are not seemingly intended to make an overarching statement about the tragedy of civilian extermination, but rather to demonstrate that the viewer is better able to comprehend tragedy visually if the outcome is simultaneously blended.

But the larger question is whether fictional or historically fictionalized representations can have an impact. For this question, I turn to the work of Judith Butler, whose 2016 book *Frames of War* discusses her disagreement with the work of Susan Sontag and offers the following:

The question that concerned Sontag...was whether photographs still had the power—or even did have the power—to communicate the suffering of others in such a way that viewers might be prompted to alter their political assessment of war. For photographs to communicate effectively in this way, they must have a transitive function: they must act upon viewers in ways that have a direct bearing on the ends of judgments those viewers will formulate about the world. (p. 79)

Butler is discussing photojournalism and not cinema in this passage, of course, but I argue that the effect on the viewer may in fact be essentially the same when it comes to the realistic depiction of atrocity. And though Butler acknowledges that Sontag “was less convinced that a photograph might motivate its viewers to change their point of view or assume a new course of action,” (p. 79) and even later “argued that the photographic image had lost the power to enrage, to incite” (p. 80), Butler nonetheless offers the rejoinder that ‘the question for war photography thus concerns not only what it shows, but also how it shows what it shows. The “how” not only organized the image, but works to organize our perception and thinking as well’ (p. 82).

Once again, I must offer a caveat by pointing out that Butler (2016) is obviously elucidating actual photographic records of war and wartime atrocities rather than film depictions. But I argue that analyzing the former may extend to the latter, given Butler’s argument that the frame rather than the historicity of the event is the primary focus. Moreover, Butler’s emphasis is on the “embedded” journalists that became so prominent in the conflicts during the latter part of the 20th century. She points to the drawbacks of embedded photography, acknowledging that “forms of social and state power are ‘embedded’ in the frame, including state and military regulatory regimes” (p. 82). But at the same time, she offers some hope that we may transcend the attempts to control the message:

If Sontag were right about the photograph no longer having the power to excite and enrage us in such a way that we might change our political views and conducts, then Donald Rumsfeld’s response to the photos depicting the torture in the Abu Ghraib prison would not have made sense. When, for instance, Rumsfeld claimed that publishing the photos of torture and humiliation and rape would allow them “to define us as Americans,” he attributed to photograph an enormous power to construct national identity itself. (p. 82)

In this sense, a filmic view of atrocity may also be presumed to have a certain power to “construct” an alternate view in which we simply refuse to abide a world in which children are rounded up and murder, or where sick and injured hospital patients are simply not exterminated because the territorial battle lines are being altered. Thus, I would conclude that the two films in question can successfully invoke blended visual metaphors that have the capacity to allow us to better incorporate and process information that would normally overwhelm our senses. And, presumably as Butler and even Donald Rumsfeld would agree, can have the same impact as more direct images of wartime atrocity.

However, the larger question of whether the image ultimately changes behavior is a perplexing one. Sontag’s (2003) *Regarding the Pain of Others* is skeptical of the power of images to change minds for a more peaceful resolution. Given that one of her key arguments is that war’s inherent conflict between opposing forces will likely have varying effects relative to the viewer’s sympathy or affiliation with one of the parties involved, one could argue that images of atrocity do not, indeed, have an automatically pacifying effect on the viewer. I find this a very difficult dilemma to resolve, the capacity of an image may not be about changing minds, but the power of the image to represent reality. And for this reason, I would offer

that the blending of images of the living and the dead in the wartime environment may have its effect primarily in its ability to represent the larger picture that simply cannot be contained in a single image, or in even a few images.

In support of this argument, a longstanding approach to understanding an individual tragedy is to recount the victim's story. While such may indeed be accomplished with tremendous effect, as the story of Anne Frank demonstrates, the recounting of 6 million individual tragedies in the Holocaust or 300,000 in the Nanjing Massacre nonetheless would clearly be a vast undertaking that would never reach a conclusion. Thus, representation is a feasible approach to confronting such tragedies, and visual depictions may be framed in such a way that we somehow begin to comprehend the enormity. As the "Gideon's War" episode of *Combat!* and *The Flowers of War* demonstrate, a visual confusion of the living and the dead underscores the notion that atrocity may be depicted in a variety of ways to alter our perceptions. This is not to respond negatively to Sontag's question whether the photography of wartime atrocity can have a pacifying effect, but rather to simply state, without taking a side on the issue, that such images can certainly capture the attention, and also that they offer a visual representation that can succeed in providing a more general glimpse of the atrocity.

Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower famously said after inspecting the by-then-liberated Nazi camp Ohrdruf that such images as those encountered in the concentration camps "beggared description" (Documenting history). Likely, he would have been all the more shocked if he had been able to simultaneously see a few of the victims of the Ohrdruf camp while they were still alive. And at the same time, he might have found a better means of verbally articulating what he saw.

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