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SCHOOL OF MODERN LANGUAGES AND CULTURES  
DEPARTMENT OF CULTURE, FILM AND MEDIA  
MEDIA MEMORIES

**SO WE DO NOT FORGET**  
OUR CONTRIBUTION TO THE PAIN OF OTHERS



AN ESSAY ON MEMORY AND THE WORK OF SEBASTIÃO SALGADO

by Gianluca Simi

NOTTINGHAM, MAY OF 2011

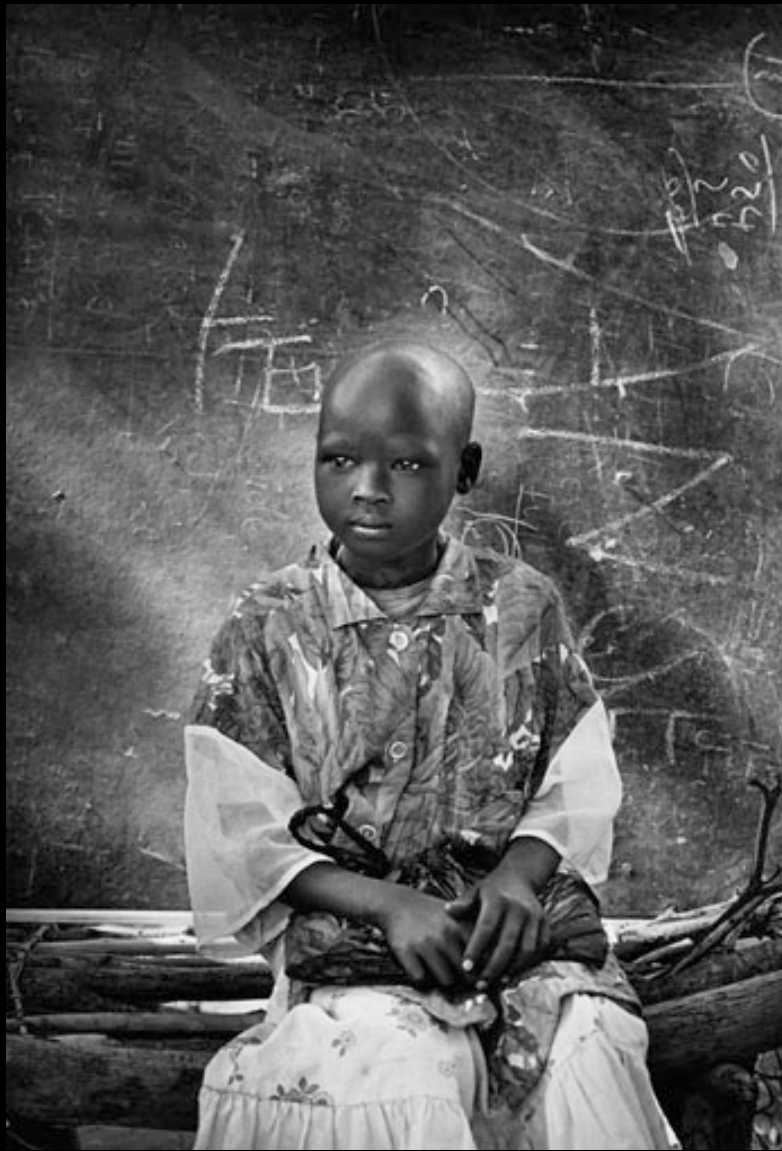
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*School at Nattinga camp for displaced Sudanese. Southern Sudan, 1995.*

## INTRODUCTION

Can photographs of events that we never experienced remind us of the pain and suffering of others? To elaborate on the answer to that question - which, for us, is already “yes” - is the main purpose of this essay. Departing from 31 selected photographs taken by Brazilian photojournalist Sebastião Salgado, we analyse the influence of photography in memory mainly, but not only, through Susan Sontag’s ideas, presented in her book *Regarding the pain of others*.

But, before we move on and analyse the photographs selected for this essay themselves, we shall deepen our comprehension of the matters of memory and society, namely how the former can be seen as “an active, interpretative process” (Prager, 1998, cited in Misztal, 2003, p. 77).

## MEMORY AND SOCIETY

Barbara A. Misztal argues that “much of what we seem to ‘remember’ and what we assume to be our personal memories we have not actually experienced personally” (Misztal, 2003, p.76). That means what we use to call “memory” is not necessarily a straight line of events we recall from the past, but is, in fact, related to the individual’s cognition, that is, their ability to acquire knowledge.

On the other hand, unlike memory, Maurice Halbwachs states that “history readily introduces, into the stream of facts, simple demarcations fixed once and for all” (Halbwachs, 2007, p.141). By that, we assume that “history” and “memory” are not equivalent. Whereas “history obeys a didactic need for schematization” (idem), “memory is produced by an individual but is always produced in relation to the larger interpersonal and cultural world in which that individual lives” (Misztal, 2003, pp.76-77).

History needs official, institutionalised approval, such as documents and registers. It is also true, however, that the fact that history is the official register of things does not forcibly make it the rightest nor the most accurate way of looking at the past. These registers have always been vulnerable to political agendas of those in power.

Memory, nevertheless, seems to be a bit freer from political attachments. It is “part of this unending work of self-hood, of organizing and locating oneself in relation to the cultural language of the cultural universe around one” (Prager, 1998, cited in Misztal, 2003, p.78). Memory is connected to the individual, and, thus, to their subjectivity, which can mold the past in ways that do not exactly match those of history.

One example of that is given by Barbara A. Misztal when she cites the work of psychologist J. Prager and that to which he refers as “false memory syndrome” (Misztal, 2003, p. 77). Prager had a patient, Ms. A., who claimed she had been molested as a child, and could as well provide the details of such. It turned out to be, according to Prager, that Ms. A. had never been the victim of molestation, but that, in fact, she had created this memory due to a massive exposure to a “national [of the United States of America] preoccupation with the themes of childhood abuse” (Misztal, 2003, p.77).

This example leads us to two conclusions. The first one is that that we mentioned just above when we stated that memory is connected to the individual’s subjectivity: Ms. A. had never been molested, but, as far as her memory went, she had. The second one is that memory, albeit more connected to the individual, is not *completely* free from external influences: Ms. A. individually generated a memory *inside* a specific context that was not in her hands to control - that of the preoccupation with childhood abuse.

It brings us back to Misztal’s statement that “memory is produced[...]in relation to the larger interpersonal and cultural world” (2003, pp.76-77) and to that of Prager when he argues that memory is “part of this[...]work of[...]organizing and locating oneself in relation to the cultural language of the cultural universe around one” (cited in Misztal, 2003, p.78). Memory is, therefore, a convergence between what we, as individuals, remember, and that to which we, as members of a society, are *led* to remember.

This ratiocination finally leads us to the ideas of *embeddedness* and *embodiedness*. Memory, according to Misztal, is embedded in a certain context, “which encourages us to pay attention to the influence of the present on the recovery of the past” (Misztal, 2003, p.77), and is embodied,

that is, exists in an individual, “which alerts us to the ways in which our feelings and bodily sensations[...]help to interpret the past” (idem).

## MEMORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY

In 2004, Sebastião Salgado spoke at the Graduate School of Journalism at the University of California, Berkeley, about the the photographer as an activist. At the beginning of the conversation, professor Ken Light, who was the host of the event, told Salgado, in a tone of unconscious confession, that: “I look at these pictures and I feel like I’m there. I’m inside the story, I’m inside their lives” (UCtelevision, 2008). That confession, as we dare name it, depicts our very point when talking about the relation of memory and photography, on which we shall elaborate henceforth.

Marita Sturken argues that “memory seems to reside within the photographic image, to tell its story in response to our gaze” (Sturken, 1997, p.19). A photograph has the power to catch only a moment at a time, and, yet, it is precisely the inability of a continuous flow of narration that makes it so powerful towards memory. Especially in times of “nonstop imagery”, as Susan Sontag points (Sontag, 2003, p.19), a single frame, a single shot is able to eternalise its subject. Sontag continues:

[...]when it comes to remembering, the photograph has the deeper bite. Memory freeze-frames; its basic unit is the single image. In an era of information overload, the photograph provides a quick way of apprehending something and a compact form for memorizing it.

(idem)

Photography has been, according to Sontag, the most effective means to show and tell people about the lives of those elsewhere. That is, in fact, the motive of her book, entitled *Regarding the pain others*. Images of terror, of suffering, of horror hit us from every corner; they shock us, haunt us, and, most importantly, remind us of “a suffering that is outrageous, unjust,

and should be repaired. They confirm that this is the sort of things which happens in that place” (Sontag, 2003, p.64).

Nonetheless, it does not matter how impacting those photographs can be, they are not memory itself, but rather “a technology of memory, a mechanism through which one can construct the past and situate it in the present.” (Sturken, 1997, pp.19-20). Memory does not, therefore, reside within the image, but is evoked and provoked by it.

As Sturken refers to this phenomenon, photographs are “screen memories” (Sturken, 1997, p.22), and are often used as a replacement for memory, but it does not mean that they *are* memory. For, albeit we cannot “deny that the camera has ‘seen’ its subject, that ‘it has been there’” (Sturken, 1997, p.21), we do not simply look at the images, but *through* them, and at what they represent. Thus, we cannot forget “the camera’s mediating presence” (idem), that is, the fact that it has seen what it represents, but what it represents does not entirely uncover itself only by its depiction. What has been seen is not *in* the image, but can be seen *via* it.

Likewise, what we see in the photographs is not objective; the memories it will create are not the same for every spectator. Sontag explains:

[...]the photographic image, even to the extent that it is a trace[...]cannot be simply a transparency of something that happened. It is always the image that someone chose; to photograph is to frame, and to frame is to exclude.

(Sontag, 2003, p.41)

By saying that, Sontag endorses the active role of the photographer as they are the ones to be framing a “scene” one way or another. “Framing”, says Misztal in reference to Goffman’s work, “is a result of our desire to organize our experiences into meaningful activities” (Misztal, 2003, p.82). According to Misztal, as we frame, we determine what is important to be seen, what *should* be seen. And, by stipulating what that is, we get to Sontag’s idea on collective memory, or rather, on the inexistence of one, towards what she calls “collective instruction” (Sontag, 2003, p. 76).

For Sontag, there is no such thing as collective memory, there are only images - for they are what she expatiates on in her book - that constitute “what society chooses to think about or declares that it has chosen to think about” (idem). That is what we call “memory”, and, as she continues, “in the long run, [they turn out to be] a fiction” (ibidem). Memories can, therefore, be generated on the basis of certain photographs, which are preferred over others, and which, in addition to having being framed in a specific way by the individual behind the camera, will also be filtered by those who look at them, once “the photographer’s intentions do not determine the meaning of the photograph, which will have its own career, blown by the whims and loyalties of the diverse communities that have use for it” (Sontag, 2003, p.35).

The uses we have for these photographs and the ways in which they will interfere in memory are, thus, a result of the context in which we are as well. Memories do not exist in the past, they have to be generated and located in the present so that they are memories, they are “ways in which we view the past[...] and usually match the group’s common map of the world” (Miztal, 2003, p.82). That is, how one looks at the photographs and turns them into memories is influenced by their cultural background.

Now that we have built our path through the theories and discussions around memory, society and photography, we move on to the analysis of some of Sebastião Salgado’s photographs.

## **SEBASTIÃO SALGADO AND HIS FRAMES**

Sebastião Salgado was born in Brazil in 1944<sup>1</sup>. At the age of 16, he left his hometown, Aimorés, in the state of Minas Gerais, to study in Vitória, the capital city of the state of Espírito Santo, where he studied Economics and went on to complete a master’s degree in the same area at the University of São Paulo. In his late twenties, he moved to Paris to start his doctorate, and, a few years later, he moved again - this time to London - to work as an economist for the International Coffee Organization.

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<sup>1</sup> All the personal information about Sebastião Salgado was taken from his biography on The Guardian’s website.



In his frequent travels to Africa, still as an economist, on missions affiliated to the World Bank, he started to acknowledge the lives of those who live in extremely poor conditions. His interests started to suddenly move away from economics and closer to photography. Decided to quit his previous occupation, he devoted himself entirely to his wife's Leica - his first camera -, and worked as a freelance photographer before joining a couple of agencies, which culminated in 1979, when he joined the much-praised Henri Cartier-Bresson's Magnum Photos. Since he left Magnum, in 1984, he has been working on independent projects, which led him to create his own agency - called Amazonas Images - in order to have his work seen by millions of people worldwide.

In an interview for a Brazilian magazine in 1997, Salgado said "I do not work with misery, but with the poorer people" [our translation] (Sem Fronteiras, 1997). His work has become known internationally by its motives and by the beauty with which he is able to portray suffering, famine and war. And that is precisely, according to Susan Sontag, why Salgado's photographs have also been frequently the target of critiques, for they beautify what is ugly. However, as Sontag will herself state: "Making suffering loom larger, by globalizing it, may spur people to feel they ought to 'care' more" (Sontag, 2003, p.70).

For her, the "citizens of modernity[...]are schooled to be cynical about the possibility of sincerity" (Sontag, 2003, p.99). That is, albeit we are more exposed to images of people suffering, we have learnt to get used to them and treat them as something inevitable, almost intrinsic to life itself. We have become numb. And that is when photography steps in with a function with which it would not usually be assigned: the one of shocking. If we only look at beautiful photographs, we tend to feed a collective idea that all is fine (narrowing the spectrum through which we learn about the world to photography specifically). But, if we are exposed to what is ugly, and, yet, "beautifully composed", as Sontag refers to Salgado's work (Sontag, 2003, p.70), we are invited to have "an active response" (Sontag, 2003, p.72). Photographs like the ones by Sebastião Salgado, therefore, shock us, haunt us and hit us with the sudden perception that all is *not* fine.

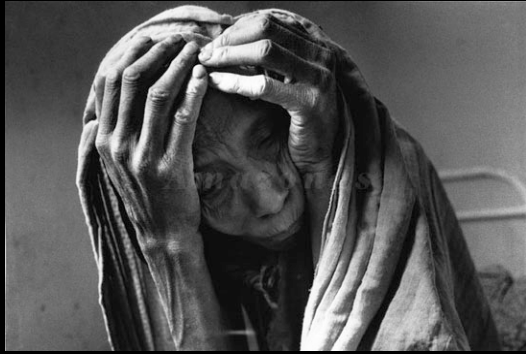
Now that we summarised his life and career, let us look at the 31 photographs taken by Sebastião Salgado which form the basis for our practical analysis. The selection of images does not obey any sort of scientific method but that of the "sudden appeal".



(1) 120 refugees live in a train, Ivankovo, Croatia, 1994.



(2) A family leaves a coal mine, Dhanbad, Bihar, India, 1989.



(3) A malnourished, dehydrated woman in the hospital, Mali, 1985.



(4) A refugee from Eritrea carrying his dying son, Sudan, 1985.



(5) At a tea plantation, Rwanda, 1991.



(6) Chemical sprays protect this firefighter, Greater Burhan, Kuwait, 1991.



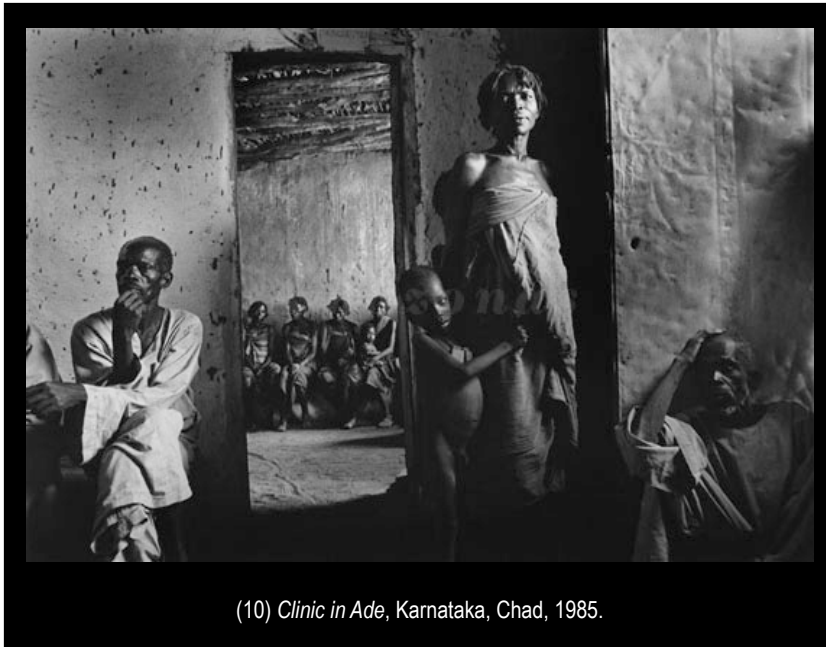
(7) Church Gate Station, Bombay, India, 1995.



(8) Coal miners, Dhanbad, Bihar, India, 1989.



(9) *Coffee curing works, Karnataka, India, 2003.*



(10) *Clinic in Ade, Karnataka, Chad, 1985.*



(11) *The Rajasthan Canal construction, India, 1989.*



(12) *Coffee plantation, Espírito Santo, Brazil, 2002.*



(13) *Former peasants living in crowded apartments, Vietnam, 1995.*



(14) *Gold mine at Serra Pelada, Pará, Brazil, 1986.*



(15) *Coffee plantation, Ethiopia, 2004.*



(16) *Natural Immunization Days, Moradabad, Uttar Pradesh, India, 2001.*



(17) *Picking tea, Rwanda, 1991.*



(18) *Polio vaccination at a village, Southern Sudan, 2001.*



(19) *Coffee plantation, Colombia, 2007.*



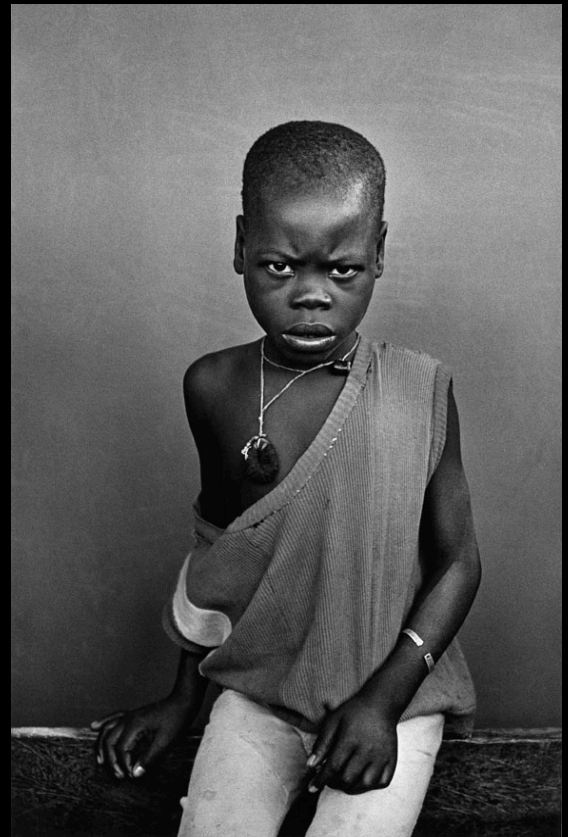
(20) *During the drought that caused famine in Sahel, Mali, 1985.*



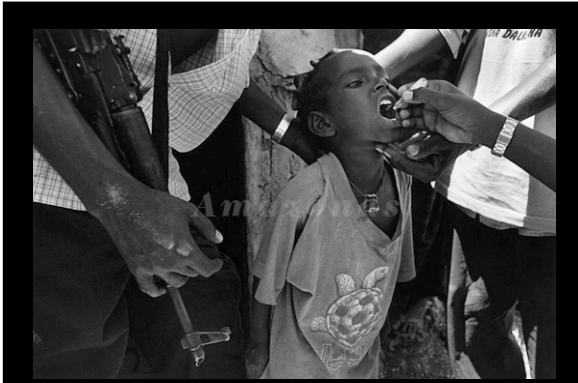
(21) *Works of the tunnel under the Channel, Folkstone, England, 1990.*



(22) *Kamaz camp for displaced Afghans, Mazar-e-Sharif, Afghanistan, 1996.*



(23) *Displaced child who lost contact with his family, Mozambique, 1994.*



(24) Armed guards protect the health workers, Somalia, 2001.



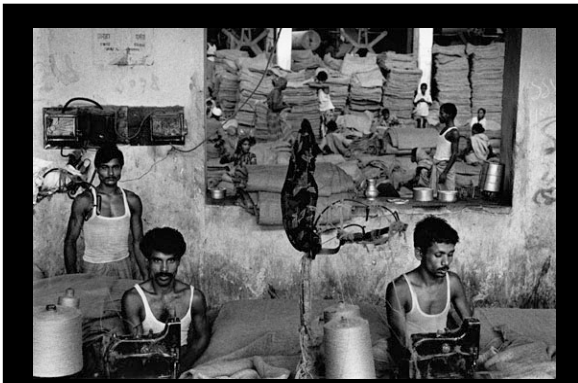
(25) Region of the Lake Faguibine, Mali 1985.



(26) Rwandan refugee camp of Benako, Tanzania, 1994.



(27) Working on an oil wellhead, Greater Burhan, Kuwait, 1991.



(28) Textile industry, Chittagong, Bangladesh, 1989.



(29) The once prestigious Jade Mawan Avenue, Kabul, Afghanistan, 1996.



(30) Transport of coffee, Espírito Santo, Brazil, 2002.



(31) Water supplies are far away from the Rwandan refugee camps, Zaire, 1994.

Facing his work as a way of advocating, Sebastião Salgado prefers social motives and he only photographs in black and white. He says it is to concentrate the emotion and allow the image to be interpreted for what it is. He also sees ideological involvement with the motive of the stories to be a fundamental factor in his career. [our translation]

(Sem Fronteiras, 1997)

That is how this interview, given back in 1997 to a Brazilian magazine, introduced Sebastião Salgado. Salgado has been, for 38 years, photographing suffering, pain, famine and the horror of war. And after all these years, he remains loyal: his work is about people; people who suffer, who are in pain, who starve and who have witnessed wars blow their lives apart. Albeit he has already worked photographing for advertisements and taking portraits of notable people, he is best at providing the world with a glimpse of what happens in the poorest places.

Any of the photographs taken by him will illustrate Sontag's idea that "some people will do anything to keep themselves from being moved. How much easier, from one's chair, far from danger, to claim the position of superiority" (Sontag, 2003, pp.99-100). Salgado's work serves exactly to dethrone us from our numb, comfortable and passive state of mind into realising that suffering is real, and that it has not stopped existing, it does not matter how hard we try to ignore it.

Photograph number (4), for example, shows a father carrying his dead son to a hospital in Sudan in the apparently-long-gone year of 1985, during the severe drought that killed one million people in the Sahel. That shot was taken 26 years ago, and, yet, if we renounce our numbness, we will realise that similar things are still happening. The same being said about photographs (2), (3), (8), (10), (20), (22), (23), (25), and (30).

Salgado's photographs are able to capture, in "cinematic" style (Sontag, 2003, p.70), moments that appear to belong to the realm of the everyday. How terrifying it might be, as we look at photographs number (5), (9), (12), (15), (17), (19) and (30), to acknowledge that even the most trivial action such as drinking a cup of coffee or tea can be related to the misery of other people?

Nevertheless, for as strong as the "slap in our face" can be, Salgado stated, when he

spoke at Berkeley, that most people who see his photographs are moved by them, but the people who will give “continuity” to that slap, that is, the people who will *actively* respond to the feeling of shock, are those closest to the stories (UCtelevision, 2008). During the same event, Fred Ritchin said that Salgado’s work shook the “West’s” policy of aid to poor countries to the point that what was seen “as very generous[...]a selfless kind of help” (idem) exposed the fact that “we’re implicated in the apocalypse, in the disasters that befell them [others]. We’re implicated in the entire process of their lives as well as in our lives” (ibidem).

We continue with Sontag’s statement:

To set aside the sympathy we extend to others[...]for a reflection on how our privileges are located on the same map as their suffering, and may - in ways we might prefer not to imagine - be linked to their suffering, as the wealth of some may imply the destitution of others, is a task for which the painful, stirring images supply only an initial spark.

(Sontag, 2003, pp.91-92)

To conclude, Sebastião Salgado’s photographs work as *memento mori*, “objects of contemplation to deepen one’s sense of reality” (Sontag, 2003, p.107). By looking at his photographs and seeing *through* them, we have a glimpse of the inequality and the misery that our very own lifestyle can impose on others. His work threads its way *into* our memory. It is very unlikely that we look at any of his shots, and, then, forget them and what they represent. Those photographs remind us that we are all part of the “same map”, as Sontag says, and stunt us - or rather forbid us - from forgetting that pain is everywhere, and that we are most likely to have some contribution to that.



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## PHOTOGRAPHS' CREDIT

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