

Article

On the Ethics of Mediating Embodied Vulnerability to Violence

Meenakshi Gigi Durham 

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, The University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA 52242, USA; gigi-durham@uiowa.edu

Abstract: Media ethics has long been haunted by the question of representing human beings' vulnerability to violence. While journalism and photojournalism have an obligation to report on the realities of violence and suffering in the world, the "spectacle of suffering" is fraught with ethical dilemmas. In this essay, I seek to theorize the ethics of *vulnerability to violence* in media representation. As a starting point, I argue for the politics of embodiment as a generative process that constitutes differential vulnerabilities. I move then to consider the way embodied vulnerabilities play out in the media, as exemplified by recent events such as the Black Lives Matter and MeToo movements as well as in times of war, from Vietnam to, more recently, Ukraine and Israel/Palestine. This leads to considerations of spectatorship: who looks and who is looked at? How are these relations of gazing related to the vectors of social and geopolitical power? Are images of embodied vulnerability simply media spectacles that reinforce power hierarchies, or are they powerful prosocial messages that might mobilize humanitarian activism? To address these epistemic questions, I propose that the feminist ethics of care encompasses an invitational rhetoric that can guide media praxis. Care ethics is aligned with various religious epistemologies, and because of that, I argue for it as an umbrella framework that has application in a variety of national and cultural contexts.

Keywords: embodied vulnerability; vulnerability to violence; mediation; media ethics; feminist ethics; ethics of care



Citation: Durham, Meenakshi Gigi. 2024. On the Ethics of Mediating Embodied Vulnerability to Violence. *Religions* 15: 1127. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15091127>

Academic Editors: Hildegund Keul and Claudia Bruns

Received: 31 May 2024

Revised: 10 September 2024

Accepted: 11 September 2024

Published: 18 September 2024



Copyright: © 2024 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

Media ethics has long been haunted by the question of representing human beings' vulnerability to violence. While journalism and photojournalism have an obligation to report on the realities of violence and suffering in the world, the "spectacle of suffering" (Boltanski 1999, p. 3) is fraught with ethical dilemmas. On the one hand, scholars argue that the impact of images of suffering can mobilize empathy and humanitarian action (Chouliaraki 2006; Ephron 1978; Mallette 1978; Linfield 2010); on the other, critics note that such imagery constitutes an invasion of privacy and is often exploitative of the victims and survivors of violence while not reliably motivating any emotion or action (Chouliaraki 2006; Goodwin 1983). Further, there is the issue of the trauma precipitated by capturing as well as viewing such images—trauma to the photojournalist/imagemaker, to the subject of the image, and to the audience (Durham 2023), all of which need to be considered in media decision-making regarding representations of vulnerability to violence.

Chouliaraki notes that the "spectacle of suffering" is inherently politicized. In her view, mediation is "the most important ethical power of contemporary public life," and "[t]he mediation between spectator and sufferer is a crucial political space because the relationship between the two of them maps on to distinct geopolitical territories that reflect the global distribution of power" (Chouliaraki 2006, p. 22). In this essay, I seek to theorize the ethics of *vulnerability to violence* in media representation. As a starting point, I argue for the politics of embodiment as a generative process that constitutes differential vulnerabilities. I move then to consider the way embodied vulnerabilities play out in the media, as exemplified by recent events such as the Black Lives Matter and MeToo movements as well as in times of war, from Vietnam to, more recently, Ukraine and Israel/Palestine. This leads me to

considerations of spectatorship: who looks and who is looked at? How are these relations of gazing related to the vectors of social and geopolitical power? Are images of embodied vulnerability simply media spectacles that reinforce power hierarchies, or are they powerful prosocial messages that might mobilize humanitarian activism? To address these epistemic questions, I propose that the feminist ethics of care encompasses an invitational rhetoric that can guide media praxis (in terms of production as well as audience) toward a better understanding of, and solidarity with, people who are vulnerable to violence and their representation. Notably, concepts and practices of care, writes [Ismail \(2021\)](#), are “informed not only by ethnicity and kinship but also by religiosity” (p. 217). Thus, in advancing feminist care ethics as an umbrella framework for media practice vis-à-vis embodied vulnerability, I explore the ways in which a range of religious epistemological traditions buttress this approach.

2. Vulnerability to Violence as Embodiment

Although these two terms—vulnerability and violence—are multifaceted and complex, a key feature of both is the concept of embodiment. While people and objects, such as the Earth, are vulnerable in multiple ways, human physical vulnerability is perhaps the most compelling aspect of vulnerability, and vulnerability to violence is a crucial consideration in contemplating the ways in which human beings are vulnerable. In reflecting on vulnerability to violence, one must necessarily think of the body, its fragility, its exposure, its marking as a target of violence which is often effected through codes of gender, sexuality, race, class, and disability; these are all corporeal figures, assigned through reading bodies within social power hierarchies in which some bodies are accorded less power than others by dint of skin color, genitalia, sexual activity, or visible difference in ability, among other factors.

From this perspective, contemporary theorists understand bodies as a *process* rather than as a fixity or stasis. Bodies are made legible through discourse ([Bourdieu 1984](#); [Butler 1990, 1993](#); [Foucault 1977, 1978, 1980](#)), but recognizing the social construction of bodies is not to dismiss their materiality. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost refer to “processes of materialization” ([Coole and Frost 2010](#), p. 2) and “choreographies of becoming” (p. 10) in which bodies’ engagements with the world shape their signification and thus their experiences; the body is “a visceral protagonist within political encounters” (p. 19):

[N]o adequate political theory can ignore the importance of bodies in situating empirical actors within a material environment of nature, other bodies, and the socioeconomic structures that dictate where and how they find sustenance, satisfy their desires, or obtain the resources necessary for participating in political life. (p. 19)

Gail Weiss and Honi Fern Haber describe embodiment as “a way of living or inhabiting the world through one’s acculturated body” ([Weiss and Haber 1999](#), p. xiv). [Heath \(1981\)](#) posited the “suturing effects, the effecting of the join of the subject in structures of meaning” (p. 106). Today, we might call this an interface, recognizing the material body as a conduit between discourse and biology constituted through its “dynamic relationships with the discourses and vectors of social identity and location” ([Durham 2016](#), p. 4).

It is via this process of embodiment that physical as well as other forms of vulnerability are constituted. The most literal aspect of embodied vulnerability is the constitution of particular bodies as vulnerable to violent assaults. It is important to emphasize here that the people whose bodies are rendered vulnerable in these ways are not guilty of putting themselves in harm’s way or somehow bringing on the assault. Rather, social power structures have operated in ways that create differential embodied vulnerabilities. Such assaults also reveal a different sort of vulnerability: the moral vulnerability of the assailant ([Haker 2023](#)).

In the early works on vulnerability, the premise was that all humans are vulnerable, and to an extent this is true. Anyone could have a serious accident, anyone could become disabled, anyone could be violently attacked, in a crime situation or a war or for some other reason. In the United States and elsewhere, horrifying mass shootings are claiming

lives in schools, in shopping malls, in churches, and on the street; thus, anyone could be vulnerable to a shooter's bullets through absolutely no fault of their own. The Australian philosophers Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers, and Susan Dodds note that "human life is conditioned by vulnerability" (Mackenzie et al. 2014, p. 1).

Judith Butler and Adriana Cavarero, among others, have focused on "corporeal vulnerability," to use Butler's term. Both interpret the body as "an entity that is—above all else—vulnerable to injury" (Murphy 2011, p. 577). Butler notes in her book *Precarious Life* that "each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies" (Butler 2004, p. 20). She is also aware that "there are ways of distributing vulnerability, differential forms of allocation that make some populations more subject to arbitrary violence than others" (p. xii).

It is this differential allocation of vulnerability that is critical, and in the contemporary moment, we are compelled to consider this more and more.

3. Differential Embodied Vulnerabilities in the Media

Indeed, contemporary thinking on vulnerability precipitated by the MeToo movement as well as the Black Lives Matter movement—both of which were US-based but had a global impact—focuses intensely on differential embodied vulnerabilities, especially in light of the historical and social bases for them. This position moves beyond the ontological view of vulnerability (i.e., that we are all vulnerable or potentially vulnerable) to recognize the role of power, the actuality that "inequalities of dependency, capacity, or need render some agents [more] vulnerable to harm or exploitation by others" (Mackenzie et al. 2014, p. 6). We must be alert to the historically, culturally, and politically produced vulnerability of particular groups, such as women, people of color, indigenous people, undocumented people, unhoused people, people with disabilities, and people whose gender identity and sexuality challenge mainstream categories. And the intersections among these ascribed vulnerabilities raise even more acute issues. These groups are rendered vulnerable in multiple ways, most of which pertain to embodiment: sexual and physical assault, the deprivation of basic life needs such as food and shelter, and health care.

Our awareness of these embodied vulnerabilities has been raised, or even forced, by media representation, and the representation of vulnerability in the media is a double-edged sword: on the one hand, there is a level of consciousness-raising that has happened via the mediation of vulnerability, but, on the other, the media are also culpable in terms of exploiting vulnerability, reinforcing social hierarchies, and weaponizing vulnerability. Photographs of war victims exemplify these tensions. One might also reflect on the infamous 2022 Johnny Depp–Amber Heard trial, where a woman's identification as a domestic violence survivor was used as a weapon in a defamation suit that became a lucrative media spectacle. More recently, news photos and videos as well as social media images of the wars in Ukraine and Palestine have caused controversy, causing the censorship and removal of graphic images of the human toll exacted by these conflicts. Moreover, some of these images were AI-generated, such that the realities of human suffering have been distorted and potentially trivialized by visual disinformation.

This brings us to notions of the spectator and spectatorship. We must acknowledge vulnerability in order to address it. I use the term "address" because I do not want to condemn vulnerability as a problem that must be solved or a condition that must be obliterated. As many have argued, vulnerability can be an impetus for a great deal of good: for caring, for tenderness, for support, for collectivizing. It can also be the starting point for social justice work, for when we become aware of differential vulnerabilities caused by historical, cultural, and political exertions of power in ways that cause harm, then we can seek the sources of vulnerability-as-harm and try to change them. So, seeing is believing; a spectator can reflect on suffering, can take responsibility for it, and can become an agent of social justice.

This possibility remains, though Lillie Chouliaraki (2006) has critiqued such a position as the "optimistic hypothesis" of the spectacle of suffering. In her perceptive analysis of the

mediation of suffering, she parses the ways in which a great deal of media representation actually reinforces existing power hierarchies, particularly transnational ones between the Global North and South. Who is the spectator and who is the sufferer? she asks. Within that seemingly simple question lies a complex and important analytical framework in which media representation assumes a Western/Northern spectator who is being urged to feel compassion or pity for a distant “Other” sufferer. Chouliaraki argues that most media representations of suffering fail to create a connection between the spectator and the sufferer or the vulnerable person, but rather create connections among spectators, a homogenized Western/Northern “we” that stands in opposition to the suffering non-Western/Southern “they”.

The issues I have raised thus far are all distilled in a particular and well-known image, which is commonly referred to as “napalm girl” although it is officially titled “The Terror of War,” taken in 1973. To repeat Chouliaraki’s question, who is the sufferer and who is the spectator? This child, Kim Phúc Phan Thi, was (and is) South Vietnamese. The photographer, Nick Ut, is also South Vietnamese. But the intended spectators were the news audiences of the Global North, and the photo won the Pulitzer Prize, a U.S. honor. The photographer intended to mobilize compassion and antiwar action with his photograph. Still, the power hierarchies of the image are clear. The Vietnamese were the sufferers, versus what Chouliaraki describes as “the comfort of spectators in their living rooms” (Chouliaraki 2006, p. 4). The fact that the naked child is female matters: suffering is gendered, and the vulnerability of girls and women is far more likely to be represented than the vulnerability of men. Race matters, too. It is unlikely that a white child would have been depicted in this way, especially for audiences in the Global North.

This photograph has received a great deal of media attention lately because of its recent 50th anniversary, and Kim Phúc herself believes now that it was important for people to see this image of her, naked, burned by napalm, and screaming in terror and pain. To quote her own words, the representation of her embodied vulnerability serves “as a reminder of the unspeakable evil of which humanity is capable,” pushing spectators to confront violence rather than hiding from it. “I’m glad Nick captured that moment,” she wrote recently in the New York Times (Phan Thi 2022, p. 7). Similarly, it has been argued that the representation of George Floyd’s vulnerability catalyzed the consciousness of Black vulnerability to police brutality. Floyd was murdered by police officer Derek Chauvin on 25 May 2020, and a teenage bystander’s cellphone video of his death went viral, mobilizing protests the world over and serving as evidence in Chauvin’s trial, where he was eventually convicted.

But many Black people challenged the incessant replay of his death as gratuitous and re-traumatizing. In U.S. history, we can consider many such images and videos: the photograph of the ravaged body of the Black teenager Emmett Till, who was tortured to death by white men in the American South, is another. His mother, Mamie Till, insisted on an open-casket funeral because, in her words, “everybody needed to know what happened to Emmett Till”. The Black-owned *Jet* magazine ran pictures of his mutilated body, though mainstream media refused to, and the photographs shocked the nation into action, or so the story goes. Such images are, of course, not limited to US history: that was the belief behind images of Holocaust victims and survivors as well.

Significantly, when German POWs and citizens were shown footage of the atrocities in the concentration camps in 1945, they reacted in a variety of ways. The intention of showing them the footage was to instill a sense of collective guilt and personal responsibility for the Holocaust, but some viewers were angry at that implication, as they had fought *against* Nazism and experienced hardship during the war; many rejected the insinuation of collective guilt, instead identifying the guilty parties as Nazi soldiers and supporters. Some rejected the footage as “fake”; some were unmoved by it. As the scholar Susie Linfield observes, “We should never assume that everyone has the same reaction to an image . . .” (Worth a Thousand Words 2022).

It is important to recognize that photography involves decontextualization—that is, removing an event from the context in which it occurred—and recontextualization, when

it is disseminated via the media, or, as the scholar Mary Bock puts it, “processed and presented by a news organization, received by an audience, and used in narrative by various stakeholders” (Bock 2021, p. 14). The process of recontextualization is inherently ideological: images are used to create meaning and advance points of view. At the same time, the ways in which audiences respond are unpredictable and varied.

Yet another example of a media image of vulnerability to violence inheres in the 2015 photograph of the drowned Syrian toddler Alan Kurdi (Durham 2018). Interviews with the photographer, Nilüfer Demir, indicate that she took the pictures for altruistic reasons. She wanted the world to learn of the plight of Syrian refugees, of the terrible toll their desperate flight from Syria has taken. And initially, it did seem to generate compassion, leading to some European world leaders changing their policies and offering asylum to Syrians fleeing the war. But even initially, media outlets were divided about whether this photo should be published. Some published it, while others chose not to use it; some published it with a trigger warning; some published it on their websites but not in their print editions; some published and then removed the picture after readers protested. Later, critics disparaged the photo as “war porn” and accused the media of sensationalism in publishing it. These vacillations and shifts reveal the complex dynamics of representation and spectatorship, pointing to the volatility of representational ethics in the contemporary moment.

Similar controversies have haunted other graphic images of embodied violence as a result of war, genocide, crimes, state negligence or malfeasance, police brutality, and other institutional or systemic causes. In the New York Times photographic coverage of the war between Russia and Ukraine, images of wounded Ukrainian women and children are far more frequently depicted than any injuries to male soldiers, who are most often shown armed and in combat (At War: Images From an Expanding Ukrainian Conflict 2024). Most recently, in the Israel/Palestine war, news as well as social media in the Global North have removed images of “burned and grievously injured and dead bodies” from the Gaza settlements (Tenbarger 2024). All of these cases resonate with Chouliaraki’s question: who suffers and who spectates? Whose suffering is visible and why or why not? What are the ideological underpinnings of representations of embodied violence?

4. Media Spectacle

Given all this, it is important to question whether visual representations of embodied vulnerability are simply a media spectacle, rather than a powerful prosocial message or a catalyst for actions to challenge the causes of such vulnerability. For the media scholar Douglas M. Kellner, a “media spectacle” is a dystopian concept. Referencing Guy Debord, Kellner argues that the media spectacle is “a tool of pacification and depoliticization,” a “commodification of previously non-colonized sectors of social life and the extension of bureaucratic control” (Kellner 2003, p. 3). Media spectacles, in Kellner’s view, are alienating rather than politically engaging, though he also allows that they might “constitute a field of domination *and* resistance” (p. 11). On his account, media spectacles glorify entertainment, blurring entertainment culture with politics, economics, art, architecture, and indeed all fields of experience. Kellner situates such spectacles squarely in a time of what he terms “technocapitalism,” underscoring the commercial and profit-driven context for virtually all media images.

Arguably, photographs and videos draw audiences, and a great deal of Western media is supported by advertising based on audience numbers. The more views, clicks, subscribers, and readers, the higher the ad rates and revenues, so publishing images that draw attention and controversy is financially advantageous to the media corporation.

One might be cynical and conclude that that is the only motivation for publishing images of embodied vulnerability. Yet journalism, including photojournalism, claims a more altruistic mission and informing the public of atrocities is part of its role in educating citizens about events with political consequences and in advancing some public good. These ideals are codified in a number of journalistic codes of ethics and the mission statements of many media enterprises. For instance, the National Press Photographers’

Association Code of Ethics notes in its preamble, “Photographic and video images can reveal great truths, expose wrongdoing and neglect, inspire hope and understanding and connect people around the globe through the language of visual understanding”. It also acknowledges that, “Photographs can also cause great harm if they are callously intrusive or are manipulated” ([National Press Photographers Association 2024](#)).

But that latter sentence raises the most difficult questions. How to determine which images are callous? Which are intrusive? Should images of embodied vulnerability be represented at all?

5. News Values versus the Ethics of Care

Usually, what drives photojournalists and editors’ decision-making about publishing images of embodied violence are news values, which differ from country to country but do have some common themes, such as timeliness, impact, topicality, human interest, proximity, and novelty. These values are all used to define news and justify news decisions. As [Evans \(1978\)](#) noted, the main priority of photojournalism is “satisfying the public’s appetite for news—for the sensation of being there and for an image the mind can hold” (p. 4). The “public good” is another criterion applied frequently in ethical decision-making related to news.

But these values do not typically attend to intrusiveness or callousness. Sensitivity to such aspects of news practices introduces the need for an ethics of care. This is an ethical framework rooted in feminist philosophy. While it began by conceptualizing care work in personal situations—mothers caring for babies, for example, or people (typically women) caring for their elders or for people with disabilities—it has evolved into the consideration of social and political arrangements based in these values. An ethics of care engages both values and practice.

A framework of care compels certain questions, such as, whom do journalists care about? The sufferer or the audience (or money)? Who shoulders the burden of care? Is that the responsibility of the media or the audience? How do we balance care for the world, the public good, with care for the sufferers? In grappling with these questions, journalists and other media practitioners must also reflect on the power dynamics at work in depicting embodied vulnerability.

These questions echo the four phases of care articulated by the feminist political scientist Joan Tronto: caring about, taking care of, caregiving, and care receiving ([Tronto 1993](#)). Caring about identifies a need for care; taking care of calls for “assuming some responsibility for the identified need and determining how to respond to it;” caregiving is the action-oriented aspect of care that plays out in actual practice; and receiving care is attentive to the fact that providing care affects the receiver as well as the caregiver. Each phase has perils as well as benefits. Therefore, Tronto calls for a deeply reflexive and sensitive approach to care that recognizes the ways in which care, unthinkingly extended, can reassert hierarchies of power and exacerbate existing vulnerabilities. It is such an approach that is missing from conventional news values that drive media decision-making.

A groundbreaking scholar in feminist ethics, Virginia Held, writes, “Care ethics . . . focuses on relations between persons, on such relations as trust, mutual responsiveness, and shared consideration. It employs a concept of the person as relational and historically situated” ([Held 2006](#), p. 133). She adds, “Care and its ethical concerns of trust and mutual consideration seem to me to form and to uphold the wider network of relations within which issues of rights and justice, utility, and the virtues should be raised” (p. 137).

So, the photojournalist should begin with an ethics of care for those he/she or they are photographing informed by an awareness of power dynamics. A key question is how will this photograph affect the subject of the photograph? Kim Phúc Phan Thi writes that she felt “ugly and ashamed” and like “a damaged person” in the aftermath of the “napalm girl” photograph. But she also recounts that after the photojournalist Nick Ut took the picture, he wrapped her in a blanket and got her medical attention. He cared for her. He said later, “I wanted to stop this war” ([Kaninsky 2019](#)). He thought the photo would achieve that

end; perhaps it helped. There was an ethics of care in that intention, too. But it is critically important, through an ethics of care, to consider what the analytics of power can reveal. As Tronto has observed, “Care is always infused with power. And this makes care deeply political” (Tronto 2015, p. 9). In communication studies, we might put this to a commutation test. In other words, would one publish a photograph like this of an adult? Of an adult male? Of an adult white male? Or would *his* embodied vulnerability be more sacrosanct? Would a photographer be more protective of certain people’s vulnerability—privileged people, wealthy people, people who rank higher in the gender order, the class order, the ability order, the North/South order, thinking intersectionally about all of these? In truth, we seldom see images of privileged people’s embodied vulnerability. Given that, is it easier to represent a Southeast Asian girl’s or Palestinian woman’s embodied vulnerability? If so, why?

What about care for the journalist? This is a very recent trend in journalism studies. Journalists are like first responders or soldiers: they are on the scene of horrific atrocities, witnesses to torture, pain, murder, and sexual abuse. Journalists experience secondary trauma and PTSD, too, and we are only now beginning to acknowledge and deal with that.

Editorial decision-making about publishing photographs of embodied vulnerability must also confront other questions. Who is the intended audience or spectator? What about spectators whose identity positions are closer to that of the person in the image? What will the impact be then? Would you print this photograph if it were someone in your own family? Why or why not?

The video of George Floyd, the Black man who was cruelly suffocated to death by a white Minneapolis policeman in 2020, raises these issues. The widely circulated video was horrifying and heartrending. It re-energized the Black Lives Matter movement that began with the murder of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in Florida in 2013. But many members of the Black community cried out against the repeated airing of the video of George Floyd’s death, explaining how traumatizing it was for them to see this brutality over and over. The USC journalism professor Alissa Richardson wrote, “I now believe that circulating videos of Black and brown death at the hands of police reinforces white supremacy. It does not deter it” (Richardson 2021).

Journalists are attuned to caring about the “public good”, and often images are chosen because they are intended to mobilize care among spectators. But this consequence is not guaranteed. We know that images are polysemous: they carry different meanings for different receivers, though there is some degree of cultural constraint over the range of these meanings. And even when an image sparks pity or compassion, there is no guarantee of action to follow. Images that move the spectator to pity preserve power hierarchies and even empathy, as the media ethicist Anita Varma (2020) has argued, might evoke a personal level of connection but not political solidarity. The politics of pity or even of empathy are thus not necessarily connected with humanitarian or altruistic action. So, what is the difference between, as Chouliaraki puts it, images “that block spectators’ capacities to engage with suffering... from those that cultivate this capacity” (pp. 6–7) and mobilize actions of care?

For her, news texts, which include imagery, should induce reflexivity in the viewer, an awareness that the image is a spectacle, but the suffering depicted is real; they should contextualize the story with a view to justice, explaining *why* the situation has occurred and offering a path to deliberation and action. I fear that stand-alone images are incapable of attaining these ends. As Bock notes, “Images are unable to ‘say’ much at all by themselves. While photographs do capture light waves from a moment in time and space and offer indexical value, their meaning is largely contingent” on other factors (Bock 2021, p. 9). Narrative must accompany imagery in ways that spur action.

There are contradictory arguments, as well. Some scholars writing about news photographs have posited that news images, to use Althusserian language, hail or interpellate viewers so as to create an identity for them, and this identity is one of a publicly engaged person. The scholars Hariman and Lucaites write, “If photojournalistic images can maintain

a vital relationship among strangers, they will provide an essential resource for constituting a mass audience as a public" (Hariman and Lucaites 2003, p. 36). These scholars argue that while all media are mixed media, and news photographs are contextualized by accompanying articles or captions, for example, they are also contextualized by social codes; so the audience may bring meaning to the photograph beyond what is framed by the media text itself. The photograph, they write, can catalyze "optical consciousness" and be a site of deliberation and public engagement even without text. But because the range of such deliberation and consciousness is so vast, it is important to reflect deeply on the ethical basis for publishing representations of embodied vulnerability.

An ethics of care has the capacity to transform journalistic and editorial practice if it is understood to be rooted in values as well as an action orientation. But there are still many ambivalences that haunt the images of embodied violence, especially in times of war. Should care for the public good, the informing of the citizenry, outweigh care for the impact of the picture on the sufferer? Or vice versa?

"[T]he ethics of care focuses on attentiveness to context, trust, responding to needs, and offers narrative nuance; it cultivates caring relations in both personal, political, and global contexts", writes Virginia Held. "[T]he ethics of care advocates attention to particulars, appreciation of context, narrative understanding, and communication and dialogue in moral deliberation . . ." (Held 2006, p. 157). This is a lot to ask of an image, but it does point to a redemptive path for journalism.

For media representation to maximize its potential for cosmopolitan altruism, an ethics of care is imperative for those engaged in the capture and mediation of images of embodied vulnerability. Further, care ethics must incorporate the politics of intersectionality. There is, as the legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw has observed, a "need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed" (Crenshaw 1991, p. 45). Extant power hierarchies shape representations of embodied vulnerability, such that injuries to women and children are much more often depicted than those visited upon men; the vulnerability of people of color is more visible in the media than the vulnerability of white males. Decades of research indicate that the media tend not to publish photographs of dead or wounded soldiers (Arnow 2005; Hallin 1986; Silcock et al. 2008; Zelizer 2004). During some wars, the media's emphasis on images of victorious, usually male, soldiers and military heroism is a function of militaristic ideology, "explicable only as the erasure of contradiction, the elaboration of hope into a completely new truth of mythic proportions, all pervasive, natural, patriotic, unassailable" (Taylor 1991, p. 48). Media representations, whether they are photojournalistic, citizen-generated, or works of fiction, are constructions that are deeply imbricated into the dominant ideologies of the moment. The visual rhetoric of images of vulnerability tend to reflect the social hierarchies and implicit rules of what Taylor (2002) has called a "social imaginary", a sense of "how we stand in relation to one another . . . how we relate to other groups" (p. 107). This social imaginary renders some bodies both more vulnerable generally and more vulnerable to representation than others.

6. Ethics of Care as Invitational Rhetoric

I am not arguing here that vulnerability to violence should never be represented, in the media or elsewhere. This kind of representation, as I have argued earlier, has a powerful moral capacity, the potential to spark compassion and altruistic activism. When it succeeds in this aim, media representations of vulnerability to violence are engaging in what Foss and Griffin (1995) have termed an "invitational rhetoric". "When this happens", write Foss and Griffin, "rhetor and audience alike contribute to the thinking about an issue so that everyone involved gains a greater understanding of the issue in its subtlety, richness and complexity" (Foss and Griffin 1995, p. 5). The goal of such an invitation is not necessarily change, but change is a possibility; when it occurs, the change is "a result of new understanding and insights gained in the exchange of ideas" (p. 6). The image of embodied vulnerability in this context is presented as an offering, made thoughtfully and reflexively, with care for both the subject of the image and the audience. While Foss

and Griffin's model examines only the rhetor–audience dynamic, in the context of media imagery, the theory needs to be extended to address a third actor—the subject of the image—who must be accounted for in the decision to capture the image and to publish it. Questioning conventional patterns of representations of embodied vulnerability is crucial here. Are power hierarchies being replicated in the circulation of the image? Whose body is protected from view and whose is not? What is the impetus, what is the rationale, for exposing specific vulnerabilities and not others?

The point here is that an ethics of care provokes serious questions that disallow the depoliticization of representations of embodied vulnerability to violence. The default media protocols that shield audiences from graphic images of wounded or dead white men, especially wounded or dead soldiers from the armies of the Global North, and expose the vulnerable bodies of women and children, especially women and children from the Global South, must be interrogated in terms of the power dynamics that preclude care for the latter. Such an interrogation is designed to reveal the “scripted practices of subordination associated with racialization and gendering” (Hawkesworth 2016, p. 2) as well as the geopolitical hierarchies that subtend differential vulnerability and its mediation. Indeed, recent analyses find care ethics to be aligned with decolonizing epistemologies and ethical approaches (Motilal et al. 2021).

7. Religious Philosophy and the Ethics of Care

Care ethics' engagement with intersectional analysis parallels and extend ethical frameworks articulated in various religious epistemologies. Even though Held (2006) has argued that “when morality depends on a given religion, it has little persuasiveness for those who do not share that faith” (p. 22), religious studies have recently marked the ways in which care ethics is deeply imbricated with religious philosophies. For example, Mannering (2020) points out that in both care ethics and Catholicism, relationality is a key tenet of the formation of the self; although she posits the “natural” (rather than socially constructed) inclination of women to be carers, she argues that learning to care for others emerges from a relationship with Christ, whose principles embody an archetype of care. Religions of the Global South, too, are increasingly linked with care ethics. Simonds (2023) observes that Buddhist moral phenomenology works in dialogue with the feminist ethics of care. He asserts that

both the care ethics tradition and the Tibetan Buddhist tradition recognize how the welfare of all sentient beings is bound together in a vast matrix of cause and condition, and the relationality of these beings are centered as core aspects of relational decision-making in both. (p. 893)

He also notes that the Buddhist concept of *karuna* implies an awareness of suffering “such that one does not just *feel* concern for the suffering of others but actually does something to alleviate it” (p. 892). Care ethics can also be conceptualized as being informed by specifically Islamic philosophies and scriptures; indeed, a recent special issue of the journal *Contemporary Islam* was dedicated to this topic. Ismail (2021) asserts that the Islamic ideals of *ihsān* and *ayb* render care a fundamental Islamic religious duty, “acts of high morality, acts of devotion, and self-sacrifice without any material value” (p. 219). Across multiple religions and cultures, an ethics of care represents an advanced and honorable engagement with one's community and the world. This engagement is interpersonal as well as sociopolitical.

Given that media representations of vulnerability to violence are generated in varying social, cultural, political, economic, linguistic, and religious contexts, it is significant that widely divergent religious traditions revert to some version of a feminist ethics of care as the noblest form of praxis. In some sense, this philosophical and epistemological ubiquity delineates care ethics as an umbrella framework for media decision-making in relation to vulnerability to violence, a framework that counters the disembodied and dispassionate roster of “news values”.

8. Conclusions

Media practitioners are constantly aware of the complexities of the ethical boundaries of representation and struggle for clarity about how to represent vulnerability to violence without exploitation or intrusion while still conveying the gravity and impact of violent events. “How can we clean up reality so that accidents are bloodless, murder victims die without tears and death doesn’t hurt?” asked one editor, concluding, “We can’t. It isn’t our job” (Sorry About Photo 1983, p. 23). “Our moral compass is often tested when confronted with these tough scenes,” mused a photojournalist, “and we often forget that we are human first, before we are journalists” (Almond and Roegiers 2022). The costs of this kind of shucking of humanity and responsibility are high; public trust in the media to make ethical and careful decisions is plummeting. In our media-saturated environment, the impact of representation is monumental, and the ethics of the visual would caution against reproducing the violence of the world when representing it.

A feminist ethics of care, in tandem with intersectional vectors of power, would pose the kinds of questions that would invite deep reflection on the processes of embodiment that not only render some bodies more vulnerable to violence but also more vulnerable to gratuitous representation. A feminist ethics of care might lead to the development of a complex teleology in which journalistic and humanitarian imperatives are carefully deliberated with the recognition that they need not be counterpoised. A feminist ethics of care opens up the possibility of solidarities, or at least compassionate connections, among the imagemakers, subjects of violence, and audiences. “Solidarity”, writes Tronto (2015), “as a social value, creates the conditions for caring among people and for greater responsiveness to democratic values” (p. 37). Similarly, Selma Sevenhuijsen (1998) has argued that the integration of values derived from an ethics of care should be integrated into concepts of citizenship as they facilitate an awareness of how power is exercised. For the same reasons, care values should be integrated into journalism.

In engaging with an ethics of care in news decision-making, journalists and other media practitioners would take on the role of the moral Third, as articulated by Hille Haker (2023) in her analysis of wartime violence. In Haker’s approach, the Third is a relational dynamic that is attentive to the moral valences of the bonds among human beings, recognizing the potential for beneficent as well as maleficent relationships. The Third concomitantly refers to third parties who witness violence and vulnerability and become involved agents “who can and therefore must hold up the possibility of a ‘lawful world,’ one of justice and mutual recognition” (p. 23). Witnessing by the Third is thus infused with an ethics of care that requires an analysis of the relationships at work when vulnerabilities are exploited as well as moral action on behalf of those injured. The moral and ethical work of the Third is applicable to media spectators as well as practitioners.

But care ethics is not yet codified or routinized in media praxis. For media practitioners and audiences, care ethics offers a lens for evaluating the multivalent questions of how to represent and respond to vulnerability to violence. For as the photojournalism scholar Susie Linfield (2010) observes, “The ultimate answers to such questions reside not in the pictures but in ourselves” (p. 60).

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

References

- Almond, Kyle, and Brett Roegiers. 2022. The Photos That Have Defined the War in Ukraine. *CNN*, May 13. Available online: <https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2022/05/world/ukraine-war-photographers-cnnphotos/> (accessed on 29 May 2024).

- Arnow, Pat. 2005. Where Have All the Bodies Gone? *Extra!* August 1. Available online: <https://fair.org/extra/where-have-all-the-bodies-gone/> (accessed on 28 May 2024).
- At War: Images From an Expanding Ukrainian Conflict. 2024. *The New York Times*. Available online: <https://www.nytimes.com/article/war-images-ukraine-russia.html> (accessed on 30 May 2024).
- Bock, Mary Angela. 2021. *Seeing Justice: Witnessing, Crime and Punishment in Visual Media*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Boltanski, Luc. 1999. *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Butler, Judith. 1993. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. New York: Routledge.
- Butler, Judith. 2004. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. New York: Verso.
- Chouliaraki, Lillie. 2006. *The Spectatorship of Suffering*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Coole, Diana, and Samantha Frost, eds. 2010. Introducing the new materialisms. In *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*. Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 1–43.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1991. Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review* 43: 1241–99. [CrossRef]
- Durham, Meenakshi Gigi. 2016. *Technosex: Precarious Corporealities, Mediated Sexualities, and the Ethics of Embodied Technics*. Malden: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Durham, Meenakshi Gigi. 2018. Resignifying Alan Kurdi: News Photographs, Memes, and the Ethics of Embodied Vulnerability. *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 35: 240–58. [CrossRef]
- Durham, Meenakshi Gigi. 2023. "Napalm Girl" at 50: On Photojournalism and the Ethics of Care. *International Journal of Communication* 17: 3865–77.
- Ephron, Nora. 1978. *Scribble Scribble Notes on the Media*. New York: Knopf.
- Evans, Harold. 1978. *Pictures on a Page*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.
- Foss, Sonja K., and Cindy L. Griffin. 1995. Beyond Persuasion: A Proposal for an Invitational Rhetoric. *Communication Monographs* 62: 2–18. [CrossRef]
- Foucault, Michel. 1977. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Foucault, Michel. 1978. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage Books, vol. 1.
- Foucault, Michel. 1980. *Power/Knowledge*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Goodwin, H. Eugene. 1983. *Groping for Ethics in Journalism*. Ames: Iowa State University Press.
- Haker, Hille. 2023. Vulnerability in Times of War: The Necessity of the Moral Third. *De Ethica* 7: 7–29. [CrossRef]
- Hallin, Daniel. 1986. *The "Uncensored War": The Media and Vietnam*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hariman, Robert, and John Louis Lucaites. 2003. Public Identity and Collective Memory in U.S. Iconic Photography: The Image of "Accidental Napalm". *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 20: 35–66. [CrossRef]
- Hawkesworth, Mary. 2016. *Embodied Power: Demystifying Disembodied Politics*. New York: Routledge.
- Heath, Stephen. 1981. *Questions of Cinema*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Held, Virginia. 2006. *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ismail, Abir Mohamad. 2021. Care in practice: Negotiations Regarding Care for the Elderly in Multigenerational Arab Muslim Families in Denmark. *Contemporary Islam* 15: 215–23. [CrossRef]
- Kaninsky, Martin. 2019. Story Behind the Terror of War: Nick Ut's "Napalm Girl" (1972). October 26. Available online: <https://aboutphotography.blog/blog/the-terror-of-war-nick-uts-napalm-girl-1972> (accessed on 29 May 2024).
- Kellner, Douglas. 2003. *Media Spectacle*. New York: Routledge.
- Linfield, Susie. 2010. *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Mackenzie, Catriona, Wendy Rogers, and Susan Dodds, eds. 2014. Introduction: What is Vulnerability and Why Does It Matter for Moral Theory? In *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 1–29.
- Mallette, Malcolm F. 1978. Should These News Pictures Have Been Printed? *Popular Photography* 83: 120.
- Mannering, Hellenka. 2020. A Rapprochement Between Feminist Ethics of Care and Contemporary Theology. *Religions* 11: 185. [CrossRef]
- Motilal, Shashi, Keya Maitra, and Prakriti Prajapati, eds. 2021. Care, Community, Compassion and Virtue: Decolonizing Our Moral Landscape. In *The Ethics of Governance: Moral Limits of Policy Decisions*. Singapore: Springer, pp. 141–76.
- Murphy, Ann V. 2011. Corporeal Vulnerability and the New Humanism. *Hypatia* 26: 575–90. [CrossRef]
- National Press Photographers Association. 2024. Code of Ethics. Available online: <https://nppa.org/resources/code-ethics> (accessed on 26 May 2024).
- Phan Thi, K. 2022. It's Been 50 Years: I Am Not "Napalm Girl" Anymore. *The New York Times, Sunday Review*. June 6. Available online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/06/opinion/kim-phuc-vietnam-napalm-girl-photograph.html> (accessed on 26 May 2024).
- Richardson, Alissa V. 2021. We Have Enough Proof. *Vox*. April 21. Available online: <https://www.vox.com/first-person/22391964/george-floyd-derek-chauvin-adam-toledo-police-violence> (accessed on 26 May 2024).
- Sevenhuijsen, Selma. 1998. *Citizenship and the Ethics of Care: Feminist Considerations on Justice, Morality, and Politics*. New York: Routledge.
- Silcock, B. William, Carol Schwalbe, and Susan Keith. 2008. "Secret" Casualties: Images of Injury and Death in the Iraq War Across Media Platforms. *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 23: 36–50. [CrossRef]

- Simonds, Colin Harold. 2023. Toward a Buddhist Ecological Ethic of Care. *Religions* 14: 893. [CrossRef]
- Sorry About Photo. 1983, *News Photographer*, August, p. 23.
- Taylor, Charles. 2002. Modern Social Imaginaries. *Public Culture* 14: 91–124. [CrossRef]
- Taylor, John. 1991. *War Photography: Realism in the British Press*. London: Routledge.
- Tenbarge, Kat. 2024. “All Eyes on Rafah” Image Shared By Millions on Instagram Following Israeli Airstrike. *NBC News*, May 28. Available online: <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/internet/-eyes-rafah-image-shared-millions-instagram-rcna154380> (accessed on 30 May 2024).
- Tronto, Joan C. 1993. *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*. New York: Routledge.
- Tronto, Joan C. 2015. *Who Cares? How To Reshape a Democratic Politics*. Ithaca: Cornell Selects/Cornell University Press.
- Varma, Anita. 2020. Evoking Empathy or Enacting Solidarity with Marginalized Communities? A Case Study of Journalistic Humanizing Techniques in the San Francisco Homeless Project. *Journalism Studies* 21: 1705–23. [CrossRef]
- Weiss, Gail, and Honi Fern Haber, eds. 1999. Introduction. In *Perspectives on Embodiment: The Intersections of Nature and Culture*. New York: Routledge, pp. xii–xvii.
- Worth a Thousand Words. 2022. June 10. Available online: <https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/otm/episodes/on-the-media-worth-a-thousand-words?tab=transcript> (accessed on 26 May 2024).
- Zelizer, Barbie. 2004. When War Is Reduced to a Photograph. In *Reporting War: Journalism in Wartime*. Edited by Barbie Zelizer and Stuart Allen. London: Routledge, pp. 115–35.

Disclaimer/Publisher’s Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.