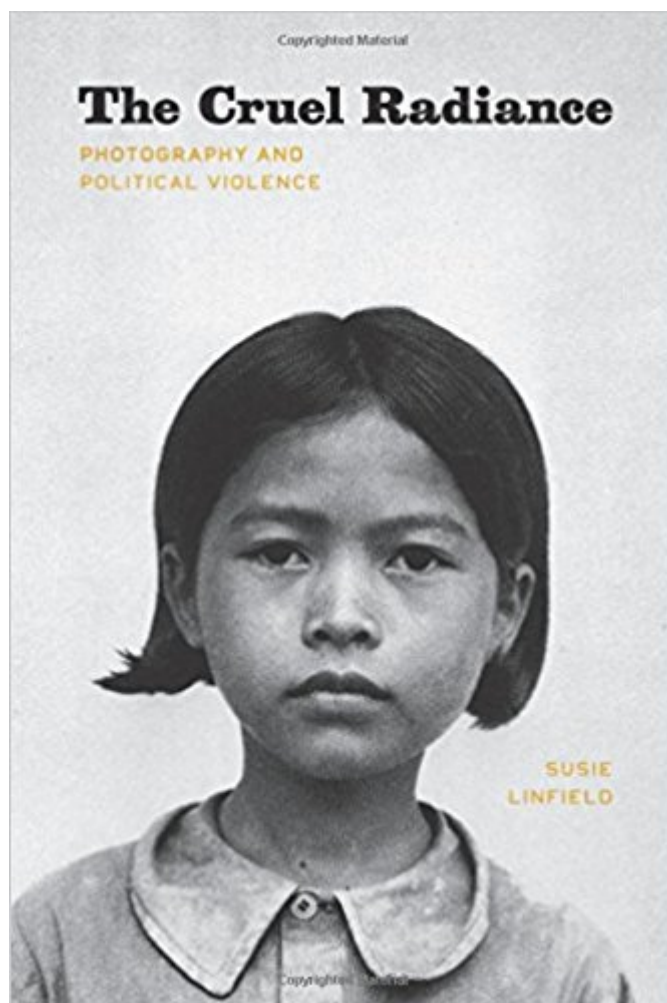


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# The Cruel Radiance: Photography And Political Violence



## Synopsis

In *The Cruel Radiance*, Susie Linfield challenges the idea that photographs of political violence exploit their subjects and pander to the voyeuristic tendencies of their viewers. Instead she argues passionately that looking at such images—and learning to see the people in them—is an ethically and politically necessary act that connects us to our modern history of violence and probes the human capacity for cruelty. Grappling with critics from Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht to Susan Sontag and the postmoderns—and analyzing photographs from such events as the Holocaust, China's Cultural Revolution, and recent terrorist acts—Linfield explores the complex connection between photojournalism and the rise of human rights ideals. In the book's concluding section, she examines the indispensable work of Robert Capa, James Nachtwey, and Gilles Peress and asks how photography should respond to the increasingly nihilistic trajectory of modern warfare. A bracing and unsettling book, *The Cruel Radiance* convincingly demonstrates that if we hope to alleviate political violence, we must first truly understand it—and to do that, we must begin to look.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"It's not enough to say that Susie Linfield looks at photography with fresh eyes. Throughout this book—for me, most powerfully when she takes on Nazi extermination camp photographs—she sees with a mind unintimidated by fashion, shibboleths, attitude, cliché. She sees behind the pictures she looks at, to their motives, fears, ambitions, and

lies. She writes through them. (Greil Marcus) "A profoundly thoughtful account of the role of photojournalism in an irremediably violent world, Linfield's book is as much about conscience and empathy as it is about photography. Examining images from the Spanish Civil War to Rwanda, she accepts no easy, sweeping answers. Rather, with vivid common sense and with painstaking, often abashed humanity, she guides us through the moral minefield where horror meets art, and helps us to see. Claudia Roth Pierpont (Claudia Roth Pierpont) "This is a magnificent book. Susie Linfield has a good eye for the photographs and a good head for the politics. And she has the moral strength to look at these images of mutilation, death, and destruction, explain their value, and demand that we look at them, too. (Michael Walzer) "The Cruel Radiance is a brilliant, lucid, and incisive exploration of photography and political violence. It looks deeply and unsparingly at how photographers have pictured war, genocide, and atrocities, and in so doing illuminates photography's democratic promise. By making the world present to us even when we want to look away, photographs have the potential to make us think and question together, to draw us into a community of witnesses. (Kiku Adatto, author of *Picture Perfect: Life in the Age of the Photo Op*) "A somber, heartfelt plea for readers to see the truth and acknowledge and understand the consequences of humans' potential for inhumanity. This should be required reading for students of journalism and political science and general readers with an interest in human-rights activism." (Library Journal) "Linfield's great achievement is more than to shake up the orthodoxy that says, 'Look away!' It's a call to arms, an incitement to look closely at the world via the medium of photography, and, implicitly, to do something about it. (New Humanist) "A smart, very readable dismantling of postmodern criticism's confusion over the power of photojournalism." (Los Angeles Times) "At its best, the passionate intensity and intellectual rigour of Linfield's writing may convince you that looking away, or not looking at all, is not an option. To make sense of a violent world we must, she contends, 'look at, and look into, what James Agee called "the cruel radiance of what is." ' Whatever the cost." (Guardian (UK)) "Beautifully crafted, exquisitely written, and exceptionally powerful in its arguments. --Design Observer (Design Observer) "Susie Linfield has written a brave and unsettling book . . . and she creates a calculus for a new kind of photography criticism--one that respects photography rather than distrusts it, derives its power from intellect and feeling." (Bookforum) "To look at a photograph entails a peculiar kind of participation: distanced in time and space, and severely limited in regard to the context leading to and consequences stemming from the moment fixed on film, yet often viscerally affecting. . . . Susie Linfield writes forcefully about this

predicament. In *The Cruel Radiance* her eye for the unplanned, wounding photographic detail that Roland Barthes called the punctum is acute, and her empathic intelligence shines." (The Nation)"*The Cruel Radiance* is a beautifully considered and unabashedly impassioned plea for the continuing moral relevance of photojournalism. . . . Linfield offers a defense of photojournalism that honors the photographers without turning them into saints or their work into sacred icons." (Jed Perl New Republic)"Extraordinary." — Christopher Knight, Los Angeles Times (Christopher Knight Los Angeles Times)"While images of violence and human degradation should never be easy to consume, this book contends that their wordless stories demand the kind of imagination, interpretation and thought that brings the wider world closer to our doors. As such it offers a timely analysis that is itself challenging, unflinching and, for the most part, generous in its aims." (The New York Times)"*The Cruel Radiance* is a treatise on moral witness and empathic leaps: a book of brief lives--grief lives--on both sides of the camera. . . . For Linfield, criticism is a high calling. There is a scrupulous attentiveness to her looking-in and arguing-out. . . . As criticism, *The Cruel Radiance* is a work of deep distinction. It will surely become part of the history of its field." (Alex Danchev Times Literary Supplement)"After years of intellectual stagnation in the field of photography criticism, *The Cruel Radiance* offers a stimulating, lively discussion and successfully repositions documentary photography in its rightful place, highlighting its decisive impact on how we come to understand the world. For restoring documentary photography's lost dignity, Susie Linfield deserves the thanks of photographers who still believe in the power of their craft." (Haaretz)"Outstanding. . . . Help[s] us comprehend the world, and possibly act to change it, strongly defending the role that humanitarian communication continues to play in sustaining a public ethos of solidarity with vulnerable others beyond the West." (Humanity)Finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award in Criticism (National Book Critics Circle Award)

Susie Linfield has been an editor for *American Film*, the *Village Voice*, and the *Washington Post* and has written for a wide range of publications including the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, the *New York Times*, *Bookforum*, the *Village Voice*, *Aperture*, *Dissent*, and the *Nation*. She is associate professor of journalism at New York University, where she directs the Cultural Reporting and Criticism program.

This is one of the must-reads for anyone that deals with photography, whether you are creating images behind the camera, analyze them for a critique perspective or use and distribute them for

publications. I personally fall within one of these categories and, while the first part of the book is a bit of a slower historical retrospective on photography criticism and why critics hate photography, it gets very interesting the more you read on. The main concept around which Susie Linfield writes in *The Cruel Radiance* is that photographs of political violence don't necessarily exploit their subjects and fulfill some voyeuristic tendencies of the ones who look at those images. The author goes on arguing that it is a necessary ethical and political act to look at those images and learn about the people in them, in order to connect the viewer with the history of violence, which could make us realize the wrongfulness of the human capacity for cruelty. Linfield takes from scholars and critics such as Susan Sontag and Walter Benjamin and looks at major historical events such as China's cultural Revolution, terrorism and the Holocaust while looking at the connection between photojournalism and the beginning of the concept of human rights. The author moves on to analyze the work on some of the major photographers in contemporary history such as Robert Capa and James Nachtwey and thinks on how photographs should adapt to today's way of making war. A really interesting take on the book comes from *The Guardian's* Sean O'Hagan, who writes the following: "Contemporary photojournalism is problematic, both in the increasingly explicit nature of its images of suffering and degradation and its uncertain role in a world where, as Linfield puts it, "we no longer have the same kind of moral and political framework" that governed our responses to the war photography of the past. For these reasons, her book only really comes alive when she moves beyond the narrow world of theoretical criticism and tackles the photography itself. Specifically, the role of photojournalism in a world where the old certainties no longer apply and the violence of faraway wars often seems nihilistic."

Linfield's book is a well done account of photographs which represent things that, usually, we don't want to look at. The author brings into discussion the very ethics of looking, gazing and staring, criticizing opinions that affirm that to look at the pain of others is participate in the intentions of perpetrators of politic crimes, specially against human rights. The principal targets of her critics are Susan Sontag, Roland Barthes, Alan Sekula and John Berger, as well as Benjamin and Krakauer. For Linfield, these authors are not essentially wrong, but we should place their writings in perspective and not make gospels of them. In reading this interesting book, we come to know that "to look or not to look" is not merely a question of transcendental ethics, but a political act regarding the suffering of human people. Linfield not only invites us to be daring to look at the pain of others, but also to look into it, its testimonies, its visual existence, and try to make of the gaze a means of amelioration of our chaotic world.

Amazing! While arguing against my cultural heroes - John Berger, Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag - Linfield manages to respect their genius while re-instilling belief and hope into the photographic practice of documenting this world - in all its beauty and horror. A great and painful read, post-Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others*. I plan to use this book in my Conceptual Photography Seminar at UNC, Chapel Hill.

I purchased the Kindle Edition, and was disappointed to find nearly all the photos missing. Instead there was only the text [To view this image, refer to the print version of this title.] Under this text was the caption for the original image. This is not an acceptable ebook experience. How can a book about photojournalism be missing all the photos? I can't comment on the quality of the book itself, because I immediately returned the Kindle Edition for a refund.

I am surprised to see that there are not more reviews of this superb book. My attention of late has been on the topics of visibility and power and what it means for us to see and how others would like us to see or make us to see. Linfield's book is brilliant in addressing just these topics and more. If you are thinking of buying this book do not hesitate.

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