

Angelica Chong's work, written for Lorelei Ormrod's "Advanced College Essay," asks if we are able to grasp atrocity; are we responsible for comprehending it? She pursues these questions by comparing John Berger's "Hiroshima" and Philip Gourevitch's writings on the Rwandan genocide. The nebulous nature of emotional truth challenged by Chong to evaluate how well her sources succeeded.

HIROSHIMA, REDUX

Angelica Chong

History is the propaganda of the victors," Avi Shlaim writes in *The Iron Wall*, a book about the Arab-Israeli conflict that has troubled the Middle East and the dispossessed and displaced people of Palestine since 1947 (34). He is talking about how revisionist historians depicted the wars between the Arab world and the then-nascent nation of Israel, but his words can arguably be applied to almost all major conflicts, and even more so to those whose subtle truths and minutiae have been made unfocused by a collective memory stretched thin with time. The bombing of Hiroshima occurred just two years before the partition of Palestine but, while the latter was to be the starting point for the protracted struggle that continues to plague the region today, the former is viewed as an end—a decisive one—and not a beginning. Although the consequences of Hiroshima have reverberated through time to affect us even today, the memory of Hiroshima itself remains just that: a vibration, a low background hum that only occasionally reaches a frequency we can hear when politicians make vague references to World War II, or when August 6th rolls around every year and Japan mourns.

Why is Hiroshima not present, as John Berger writes, in our "living consciousness" (315)? Why do we still write books about the Arab revolt of 1936, and Transjordan, and the rise of Zionism, but not the aftereffects of Hiroshima? The simple—and tempting—answer is that the former is still relevant, while the latter is not; the former is

still a problem in today's world. But we should question this line of thinking. Who decided to close the book on Hiroshima, who decided that Hiroshima itself was the end of this particular story, and that everything that happened after—the immediate deaths, the generational devastation, history's haunting—belonged in an unwritten epilogue? What reality are we operating in when we decide relevance or the lack thereof?

Berger's essay "Hiroshima" reveals many inconvenient truths about the way we interact with the aftermath of war, but perhaps the most awfully wondrous thing he has to say about our hypocrisies and cowardice is this: "Does not this evocation of hell make it easier to forget that these scenes belonged to life? Is there not something conveniently unreal about hell?" (317). Perhaps the sheer quantity and concentrated quality of violence that has been enacted in Hiroshima has lent it a surreal nature that has made it almost physically inconceivable for us to wrap our minds around. We can only approach it obliquely, from different angles that get closer to a central understanding but never quite touch it. We can only comprehend asymptotically. Even so, Berger maintains that it is moral responsibility to confront this hell-scape as best we can; distancing through abstraction is to make Hiroshima unreal, and to make it unreal is to do no justice to the undeniable reality for its survivors.

Berger himself comes to this realization only after a conversation with his Marxist friend, who welcomes the "positive possibilities" that the "likely scale of destruction which would be caused by nuclear weapons" would offer an American socialist revolution (316). The callousness of her words prompts Berger to revisit *Unforgettable Fire*, a visual archive of Hiroshima that he had previously ignored. Berger has to make an active choice to open the book, to thumb through the pages, and to fully see—not just look at, without intention—the horrors of the past. This is his way of reinserting Hiroshima into his own "living consciousness" (315). Unfortunately, plausible deniability is easier than that; it is easier to say 'I was never taught this in class,' or ask 'How could I have known?' than to go out looking for something that might not even be clear to you yet. If ignorance is bliss for some, then surely innocence is a privilege for us all.

Not many people have the courage to do what Berger has done, and, even when they do, it seems they still find themselves somehow thwarted from a full understanding. But they can get as close as possible, and perhaps that is all they can ask for. Philip Gourevitch is one such person, advocating for the confrontation of history. He writes in his book about the 1994 Rwandan Genocide that he had travelled to Rwanda “to be stuck with [the dead Rwandans]—not with their experience, but with the experience of looking at them” (16). Yet even as he walks through the “intimately exposed” bodies and village ruins—the most visceral and explicit evidence of the horror that had occurred—he admits it is “still strangely unimaginable . . . one still ha[s] to imagine it” (16). Despite his efforts, there is still something in his way, some metaphysical block that has barricaded him from accessing the horror. He stands where the Hutus and Tutsis had stood, but time has made it a different place altogether. In the end, he concedes, slightly disturbed at his own thoughts, that “the dead at Nyarubuye [a]re . . . beautiful” (19). He takes photographs, because “[he] wonder[s] whether [he can] really see what [he is] seeing while [he sees] it” (19). Gourevitch distances himself—perhaps unconsciously, but undeniably. He sees beauty in death because to render horror beautiful is the only way he can make sense of what he is seeing; he literally places a camera between his eyes and the landscape and takes photographs that he can look at again later, a safe distance away from the immediacy of Rwanda that demands an instantaneous and empathic understanding he cannot afford without the risk of becoming complicit in the tragedy itself, as if observation without a barrier means that even as he looks into this abyss it can look back at him too.

As if he is aware of his own subconscious dissociation at the physical locations, Gourevitch tries to unpack the meaning behind superlatives like ‘unimaginable’ that are so frequently used to describe Rwanda, questioning why people continue to think of them like this when they have clearly been imagined by someone. He tries to see it for what it really is—the Othering of the Rwandans to remove culpability from ‘normal’ people—but, even then, perhaps he falls short. In contrast, Berger reclaims these overused buzzwords like ‘hell’ and ‘evil’ that have been so ingrained into our lexicon of horror that they have

ceased to be meaningful. The word 'evil,' for example, has been reduced to a "little adjective to support an opinion or hypothesis (abortions, terrorism, ayatollahs)" (320). Berger refuses this contemporary, watered-down definition. He uses the word as it was intended to be used; he sees evil as "a force or forces which have to be continually struggled against so that they do not triumph over life and destroy it" (320). For Berger, 'evil' is not something static, nor a one-off event that has a definitive outcome; real evil necessitates constant engagement. Yet he only comes about to this realization after having viewed the art in *Unforgettable Fire*, after he has gotten as close to the heart of it as possible. Even his time in the military cannot place him closer to Hiroshima than this; he served in the British Army at the same time that the bomb was dropped—the same time that all the lives he looks back on now were lost—but there seems to be, between survivors' experiences and drawings and the history that is written down in history books, an ever-widening abyss that cannot be completely forded. Berger's words, used so deliberately, are perhaps the closest he can come to begin to grasp some of the truth behind them—the minute closing of a gap. Both Berger and Gourevitch struggle against the weight of orthodox narrative history through these acts of engaged imagination that are the truest—if not the most precisely factual or empirical—forms of witnessing and acknowledging the past.

However, if we are used to distancing ourselves from horror by burying it under hyperbole, we are also guilty of distancing through facts: an act of redefinition that becomes a lie by omission. Berger advises against precisely this: by stripping down Hiroshima to its pure facts, he claims, we start to "consider numbers instead of pain. We calculate instead of judging. We relativize instead of refusing" (319). A certain tension seems to lie in his writing when he emphasizes the importance of emotional truth in remembering Hiroshima itself, but also the importance of knowing that the act that preceded such horror "was not a miscalculation, an error, or the result . . . of a situation deteriorating so rapidly that it gets out of hand" (319). He is as quick to acknowledge the political reality and its coldly-assessing, indeed human architects that made the decision to bomb Hiroshima as he is to condemn them. We must not forget the invisible hand that made

all this a reality; but, at the same time, we cannot submit to their history of statistics and directives. We must make our own—or, in the case of the Hiroshima survivors, draw their own.

One of the drawings in *Unforgettable Fire*, sketched by Asa Shigemori, depicts the surreal image of three people walking with their hands raised, zombie-like. They are spattered with blood, but what is most unnerving is their hair, standing straight up from their scalps. The accompanying text reads: “I realized for the first time . . . that when people are very much frightened hair really does stand up on end” (qtd. in Berger 316). It’s a strange, seemingly innocuous observation in a sea of truly horrific images and descriptions of flayed skin, missing limbs, and burnt bodies. But perhaps it is precisely because of its incongruity that this image seems so potent. It defies our expectations of reality with its outrageousness; it forces us to defamiliarize, to remove the privilege we have that allows us to wallow, comfortable, so close to Hiroshima’s horror without needing to truly make an effort to see. When we read the history books and watch the war movies, we think we understand what it was really like; we think we have imbibed history, and therefore have a claim to it. *Unforgettable Fire* shows us otherwise. It shows us that the history we receive is not—and can never be—the history of the victims, the eye-witnesses, the survivors.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word ‘history’ comes from the Greek *historia*, which translates, almost contradictorily, to both ‘finding out’ and ‘narrative.’ The former implies an exploratory process, an unmapped journey with an open horizon beyond every step. The latter enforces structure, linearity, and a story that prioritizes comprehension. Perhaps what we need to do is to find a useful middle ground: to not demarcate needlessly based on arbitrary conceptions of realities, and end up excluding vital experiences, nor imagine we could possibly capture the full range of events in words and images that will ultimately fall short of lived experiences.

Berger starts his essay by admitting that he “didn’t consider the book [*Unforgettable Fire*] urgent, for [he] believed that [he] already knew about what [he] would find within it” (315). He ends his essay condemning his own earlier apathy, saying that “in reality—the reality to which the survivors and the dead bear witness—[evil] can never be

justified” (321). Most importantly, he defines ‘evil’ specifically as that which wears “a mask of innocence,” allowing it to “look beyond (with indifference) that which is before the eyes” (321). Opening the book simultaneously opened Berger’s eyes and his mind; it forced him into a new way of looking and knowing—a knowing that is fraught with the certainty of uncertainty, a knowing that acknowledges the limitations of one’s sight even as it acknowledges the importance of even trying at all.

Perhaps the horrors of Hiroshima and other events like its bombing can never be understood in any truly significant way by future generations through writing or talking about it; perhaps we all inevitably change the nature of these events simply by addressing them in a certain way, and in that process lose a small bit of truth each time. But surely we can combine both definitions of history to strive for something better than just either/or. Surely we can—we must—try.

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The United States detonated two nuclear weapons over the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 6 and 9, 1945, respectively, with the consent of the United Kingdom, as required by the Quebec Agreement. The two bombings killed between 129,000 and 226,000 people, most of whom were civilians, and remain the only use of nuclear weapons in armed conflict. In the year 1945, my great-great grandfather, serving in the army, wondered when he'd get to go home to his wife and the son he'd never seen. He got his wish when the US ended World War II by dropping atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Nate, Fallout 4. Hiroshima was a city in Japan. On August 6, 1945, the Little Boy nuclear bomb was deployed onto Hiroshima. This was the first time in history that a nuclear weapon was used for purposes of warfare. Hiroshima, a manufacturing center of some 350,000 people located about 500 miles from Tokyo, was selected as the first target. After arriving at the U.S. base on the Pacific island of Tinian, the more than 9,000-pound uranium-235 bomb was loaded aboard a modified B-29 bomber christened Enola Gay (after the mother of its pilot, Colonel Paul Tibbets). Hiroshima's devastation failed to elicit immediate Japanese surrender, however, and on August 9 Major Charles Sweeney flew another B-29 bomber, Bockscar, from Tinian.