James Nachtwey was awarded the Dresden International Peace Prize, an award given to those who go above and beyond to prevent violence. Oscar-nominated director Wim Wenders presented the prize. These are his remarks on Nachtwey, war and the power of photography:

Wim Wenders
Speech for James Nachtwey

If a war photographer is awarded a Peace Prize, furthermore in a city once devastated by a war, then he must be a very special person and a truly extraordinary photographer. And he must have something to oppose to war.

For it is the nature of war to engage and take in everything, to occupy and appropriate, without exception. Which war film, for example, isn't, deep down, a glorification of war, even against better judgment, and often even in spite of the best intentions?

And: It is in the very nature of images to represent what they depict. "What you see is what you get." That's exactly what makes them so very powerful. It's almost like trying to square the circle if you want to dissociate yourself from what an image presents and conveys, let alone try and tell the opposite of what it shows.

War is a huge, infernal industry, the largest one on this planet. It seems presumptuous for one man to attempt to stand in the way of this machinery. Once war has broken out, everything spirals out of control almost immediately, turning even the armies and the soldiers who fight in it into helpless

onlookers, victims of their own hubris. Who would dare then to oppose it and put it into perspective with mere… photographs. Who would seriously deploy cameras against tanks?

Just make the effort and visualize it for yourself! After all, almost all of us take pictures today. Even your cell phones don't come without a camera any more. Or perhaps you have one of those small, convenient digital devices. Or you may even own some professional equipment… Just imagine going to war with that! And imagine doing so just to take a picture to undeceive the entire world and tell them what's going on there. Yes: a photo that would influence the outcome of the war or even end it! Right. That would be sheer madness!

All right then, imagine just this: You want to change the life of ONE person with a photograph. That alone is an enormous challenge, if you think about it. The short moment when you look through the viewfinder or at the tiny display, as you point the camera at something, and finally press the shutter button… that second is supposed to achieve something, to capture something and thus captivate, and thereby move somebody, or more so: even shake up the world?

How can that be possible? Who do you have to be to attempt such a thing? How… would you possibly go about it?!

James Nachtwey's images give us an accurate idea of how he "goes about it," in the true sense of the word: where others "just want to get out of here," that's where he goes. He travels, in principle, in the direction of places that other people are only desperately leaving from, or have already left in a hurry, or can't leave anymore.

It is with that first movement that he's already opposing war: With himself. With his safety, his life, his affection, his conviction. All of the above are captured in his images.

"Wait a minute!" you may object. "Perhaps he gets a kick out of this going-to-war thing, or maybe he is some kind of thrill-seeking tourist. After all, there are people who climb up skyscrapers or walk tightropes at dizzy heights or hurl themselves out of planes or jump off bridges—things which none of us would do, but which a few others apparently like to do. Couldn't Nachtwey be one of those?"

If he were, he surely wouldn't win a Peace Award, he would just win some medal as an action hero. This James Nachtwey may have the same first name, but he certainly isn't a James Bond type. Who is he then?

I don't think you have to know a photographer's biography to understand who he is. That's what he shows us in each of his pictures. Each photograph contains a second one, invisible at first, that doesn't reveal itself immediately. It's a "reverse angle," if you will, a "counter-shot." That reminds us that taking photos is also called "to shoot pictures"… Yes, the camera is shooting back, is literally "backfiring!" The eye that looks through the lens is also reflected on the photo itself. It leaves a faint, sometimes shadowy trace of the photographer, something between a silhouette and an engraving, an "image" not of his features, but of his heart, his soul, his mind, his spirits. Let's stay with the first and simple word for a moment, "the heart."

The heart is the real light-sensitive medium here, not the film nor the digital sensor. It is the heart that sees an image and wants to capture it. The eye lets the light in, sure, which is why we also call it a "lens," but it doesn't "depict the image," it doesn't "depict" anything. Nor does the retina nor the nerve cords that transmit the information. The "image" is created "within."

There, it is matched with many other signals that are coming in at the same time. Some of these are related to formal or aesthetic criteria, like to composition, focus and contrast, or to the overall impression and to details. Other signals are of an ethical or moral nature. What's going on here? What's happening to the people in front of my camera? What does their dignity consist of? Or rather: what is violating that dignity? What is that image telling us? Which history leads to this moment, and what continuation does it suggest? How do I react to it as the one who is seeing it, as the witness with the camera? Am I sure I'm free of prejudices or, worse, cynicism? What is it about this image that touches me? Do I have the right to show it to others? How will it affect other people? Could what I see be possibly misinterpreted? How can I prevent that from happening? Would it help if I took a step forward or to the side? If I stepped back a little more? If I left this or that out of the frame?

There are a thousand signals and messages arriving simultaneously, all of which have to be processed within a fraction of a second. The hands are already part of the thought process as they correct the frame, the finger already knows what's coming and presses the shutter button.

What I'm trying to say is: The photograph that's just being created includes all of these thoughts, processes them as another kind of light, "an inner light," depicts them and "contains them" at the same time that it deals with "the outer light" and the outer events, thus producing next to the objective picture the invisible portrait of the photographer himself, that "counter-shot" I mentioned earlier.

And all of this isn't happening at a birthday party, or on a football field, or at a rock concert, but in a war. Everything is raw, tense, loud, cruel, out of control, insane, incredible, awful, unfair, perfidious... But that's exactly why the photographer has to be just as precise, quick, careful, considerate and dependable as if he were at a wedding or on a red carpet. No, that's not true: he has to be even more precise, quicker, more careful, more considerate and more dependable. In war, often enough, you don't get a second chance.

The photographs exhibited in the Dresden Museum of Military History represent a small selection of the many pictures that James Nachtwey has taken in over thirty years as a traveler and documentarian. They were taken in Afghanistan, in the Balkans, in Rwanda, Chechenya, Darfur, at Ground Zero in New York and in Iraq. This list could easily be extended to include images from Sudan, from Northern Ireland, from Romania, and so on, and so on.

James Nachtwey was in "The Heart of Darkness," to quote the title of Joseph Conrad's famous novel. If ever someone actually was there, it's him! One might think that this darkness shows through, that its grim, depressing reflection makes its way through the photographer's eye, weighing down his heart, his soul, his mind, his spirit.

And indeed, very often that's exactly what we feel watching TV documentaries, or seeing newspaper or magazine images: that the atrocities we see depicted have hardened the photographer's or cameraman's heart. We can often tell that he was already looking the other way while he was taking the picture, was already done with all that death, starvation and fear around him, was only thinking about himself, his own salvation from all this hell, was no longer really WITH the subjects in front of his camera, and no longer really willing to watch death at work. Taking a picture can be a form of no longer wanting to see.

In all of James Nachtwey's images we can also perceive (at the same time, in that reverse angle) that he didn't want to look the other way, that he wanted to endure the sight and watch exactly what was standing or lying there before him, that he knew he owed it to the people, the dead, the starving, the sick, the entire situation in front of his camera, that he'd see and show it as exactly as possible, wide awake and with wide open eyes.

If someone's dignity has been violated James Nachtwey doesn't violate it a second time, as a voyeur would—but he makes an effort to restore it. (Oh yes, photographs can do both!)

Now, am I just making this up, or do I have something to back up my impressions?

I believe that all we really have to do is take a closer look. All we have to do is train our eyes to see not just the PHOTOGRAPH itself, but the ATTITUDE of the eye and the heart that took it.

Every look represents a certain attitude or state of mind, your gaze just as well, at any given time. Interest, boredom, disgust, indifference, sorrow, love, surprise, curiosity, hatred, cynicism, affection, respect, aversion, exhaustion, frustration...whatever guides our eyes is depicted along with the subject when a camera is lifted to the eye. There is no picture that wasn't taken with an attitude of some kind or other.

And nowhere is this more necessary than when you stare death in the face, when you're confronted with violence, despair, the abyss, the darkness. You can make out and decipher in each and every one of his photographs the attitude of James Nachtwey. It is no secret.

I'm just picking an image of his from this exhibition that at first glance isn't all that "warlike":

Three children, little girls, are standing behind a tree. They're covering their eyes with their hands. Some distance away a helicopter is landing or lifting off, clouds of dust swirling around. We immediately recognize these helicopters. There are usually guns protruding from the fuselage, and indeed, there they are. These roaring bumblebees are bringing troops, weapons, bombs... in short,

war from above, out of the blue, and just as quickly as they came, they're gone. You immediately hear the "Ride of the Valkyries" from Apocalypse Now.

The children are everything but Valkyries. Their colorful clothes, the slippers on their feet, or the little one's innocent best Sunday shoes and socks, all tell us how ill-prepared they are for what is coming their way, inevitably, or what is leaving them behind, possibly, like astronauts would arrive or leave on a distant planet. A few moments ago the girls were scampering around, laughing, without a care in the world…and then came the invasion of the foreign gods.

The photograph invokes what may happen next or what might just have happened. Whichever the case, these children will remember this moment as long as they live. The caption that I'm turning to, after I have tried to decode the picture myself for a long time, says: "El Salvador, 1984. The army evacuates wounded soldiers from a village football field." Well, this explains it a bit.

Still the message of any photograph is only the photograph itself. In museums, you might have noticed, many people pounce on to the caption, before they even look at the picture. It's as if they were trying to protect themselves from the image. Reading creates distance, you're not really concerned any more, the information lets you stand above the things that might otherwise trouble you.

I ask you urgently: First read the photographs closely, also here, in this extraordinary Museum of Military History. Then you will realize, in the case of this picture we just looked at: There's a lot of tenderness in it! This photo was taken by someone who was more interested in the children than in the troops and their business. It's not a subject you would expect to see in a picture taken by someone who went there to photograph the war. To see (or find) this, you have to be on the children's side. You can't cover your own face with your hands and try to protect the lens of your camera from the dust. You have to do the opposite: open your eyes wide and risk the dusk in your face and your lens.

I'll move on to another image, almost the opposite to the one before. The Balkan Wars.

A Serbian infantry attack near the village of Rahic, outside Brcko, was successfully repulsed by Bosnian forces. The Serbs who where killed in action were collected from the battlefield and taken behind Bosnian lines. They were dumped in a farmyard, identified, and returned to their comrades the following day.

It shows a truck unloading its horrific cargo: dead bodies are sliding down from the bed. The driver is leaning out of the window of his truck so he can see where he is dumping his load of dead men. Among the bodies there is a wheelbarrow, in a moments it will also come crashing down... The dead are all fully dressed. The way they're sliding down the tilted surface, with their heads dangling, shows that rigor mortis hasn't set in yet.

A hand is held up in the foreground, partially covering the lens. We see the palm of the hand, the thumb pointing down. This is the right hand of a man who is standing with his back to the photographer. This isn't someone trying to stop the photographer from taking pictures; he's just motioning with his hand to direct the truck driver to the pit that we know must be there, just outside the photo... The most horrifying thing about this scene is that it feels just like an everyday building site.

Do we even want to know which war this is?

Yes! The caption explains it: "Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Bosnian army has successfully held off a Serbian infantry attack near the village of Rahic. The bodies of Serbian soldiers who fell in the battles have been brought from the battlefield behind the Bosnian lines on a truck..."

James Nachtwey is extremely precise. He is a witness, (the word "eye witness" is fitting more than ever) and he takes this responsibility very seriously. He is someone who not only wants to describe what he has just saw, but also wants to record it with words as precisely as possible so that it can be used as evidence.

We can see that the image wasn't taken at eye level. The photographer didn't look through the lens, it was "shot from the hip," so to speak. As quick as a flash, before the man who raised his hand could turn around. If he had turned around, the image would have been a completely different one, in fact, might have become impossible.

As with most of Nachtwey's photographs, the lens is a slight wide-angle. With such a lens, the photographer has to be right where it's happening. To be able to take photos such as this, you have to get close to the scene. You can't just easily zoom in from a distance. The photographer himself has no distance, he is there. And therefore we are, too, no matter if we are sitting in our living room, stand in a museum, or hold a book or a magazine in our hands.

These are pictures by someone who has a strong desire for justice in the face of the horror unfolding right before his eyes, someone who puts a lot on the line for this. Even if the photo is being taken within the fraction of a second by lifting the camera just a little more—he still instinctively finds the right angle at the same time, as if his hands were able to see...With all his senses he is present! With his body and his mind and his heart he really is where his photo takes place! The picture is a part of his own existence.

Or let us look at a third image taken during the Chechen War in the mid-nineties.

A village road, a singed wooden barn in the foreground. On the snow-covered road in front of it lies a dead woman, wearing a simple winter coat. Beside her on the ground, a purse. We see the sneakers and her thick socks, her left foot strangely and unnaturally twisted. Is it broken, was she shot at?

A woman who had ventured out to buy supplies was killed by a mortar shell. Her neighbour discovered her lying in the street.

Around the corner comes another elderly woman, cautiously, almost looking at the sight with curiosity, "the neighbor," as the caption tells us, a peasant scar wrapped around her head. She stops in her tracks and stares at the frozen body in the snow. You can almost see her thought: "That could be myself lying there!" There's a hint of surprise in her stopping short, looking at the scene. The simple, one-story houses in the background bear witness to the place's poverty. There are shingles missing, or is that damage caused by the war, too?

Actually, we can't help thinking or perhaps it's more of a vague feeling than a conscious thought: this photo is "just altogether impossible!" There's something about it that we can't quite get into our heads. In a movie, OK, we could accept a scene like this… And then we realize what it is that we think is so "impossible" about it: it's the fact that the photographer was present that he was part of it, at this very place, that he captured the neighbor right at the moment of recognition, as if she were all alone at the scene, as if there couldn't possibly be another person with a camera who's not only watching, but creating evidence of the moment as well.

We are totally at a loss to explain the photographer's attendance here. How could he make himself invisible like this? Unless he wasn't there as a photographer in the first place, rather as someone who had just rushed to the scene as well, a fellow human being who was just as shocked, just as astounded… Someone who has become so much as one with his camera, that it indeed has become invisible to other people.

I'm also beginning to catch a glimpse of something else in each of the three images that I just instinctively picked out, almost arbitrarily: I can't quite put the finger on it, but it seems to me that in these pictures the photographer doesn't just see for himself! And this is something you can not at all take for granted!

Actually, the act of photographing is a very lonely job. You are mostly left to your own devices, especially when war is raging around you or hunger and death are haunting the land. But these photographs here all have one thing in common, an "attitude," a point of view, the photographer's awareness—whatever we call it—of standing where he is for others, of seeing on behalf of others, of exposing himself, and of giving testimony, for others.

Who are these "others" on whose behalf James Nachtwey goes to war, so to speak? Are they just the subjects of his photos, the starving, the dying, the dead, the perpetrators, the sick, the injured, the sufferers, the horrified? Or don't these "others" also include us, the viewers, the very moment we begin to get involved with one of his images? When he makes himself a witness, and stands by this task, doesn't he call us to the witness box as well?

If this is indeed the case, then James Nachtwey creates a community between the subjects of his photographs and us, a community that we can't get out of so easily. He turns us into one humanity, not more and not less: Common humanity. The word "compassion" takes on its original meaning. (In German it literally means "sharing the suffering.") It doesn't connote condescension or "pity," "the pitying smile," but real empathy, when the suffering of others becomes ours as well.

Nachtwey manages to see things on behalf of both sides of humanity, the victims and the viewers, because his work is not only directed AGAINST something, against war, arbitrary violence, injustice or inequality, it is, above all, intended FOR (and dedicated to) the people he encounters in wars and in suffering, as well as for us.

I am aware that the word I'm going to use is somewhat antiquated, and it's probably difficult to translate. This man is a "Menschenfreund," a lover of humanity, and therefore an enemy of war.

And when he goes right to the heart of the war he does so on behalf of us, in order to force us to look closely, but also on behalf of the victims, as the eye-witness who wants to testify in their favor and belie war and its propaganda.

Maybe James Nachtwey is not just a photographer, but has a lot of professions.

He is also sociologist who doesn't just dutifully record the phenomena and symptoms, but who wants to understand what caused them; a minister who knows that it is not consoling that gives consolation, but most of all being there for someone else; an archeologist who doesn't just hastily burrow down into the dirt, but who carefully uncovers stone by stone; a poet who knows that he must never name things in plain words, but only invoke them in the reader; a philosopher who'd rather encourage people to think for themselves instead of self-righteously doing the thinking for them; a teacher who commands our respect because he respects everyone, including himself; a gardener who knows that you have to get to the roots when you want to pull out the weeds; a surgeon who knows that it won't do just to operate on the fractures, but that you have to lay bare the trauma inside.

In short: a man who is able to look life and death in the eye, not because he is more courageous than we are, but because he lets himself get carried by all of those for whom he does it.

And because James Nachtwey is all of the above, because he has never stopped believing that there is reason behind his work, because he has never stopped believing that his images have their greatest possible effect only if the eye and the heart behind them have an unfailing faith in humanity and its ability for compassion.

For all of these reasons and many more we should stop calling him a "war photographer." Instead, look upon him as a man of peace, a man whose longing for peace makes him go to war and expose himself... in order to make peace. He hates war with a passion, and loves mankind with even more of a passion.

I can't think of anyone who would deserve this award, in this city of Dresden more than James Nachtwey.