

**How can image-makers counteract
compassion fatigue and the effects of
clichéd, violent war imagery by
learning from artists whose practice
conveys subtle reverberations of
conflict in ethical ways?**

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How can image-makers counteract compassion fatigue and the effects of clichéd, violent war imagery by learning from artists whose practice conveys subtle reverberations of conflict in ethical ways?

Summary:

This research examines how incorporating enduring aftermath gazes through art-inspired immersive approaches could help reinvent conflict journalism practices to sustain ethical resonance amid compassion fatigue risks. In other words, the question juxtaposes common intense imagery against patience alternatives and asks if incorporating those enduring aftermath gazes through art-inspired approaches could help reinvent conflict documentary practices to be more ethically attuned to reverberations while fighting numbing risks.

Introduction:

Famous pictures from the Vietnam War dramatically affected Americans' anti-war sentiments by bringing the terrible reality of extreme suffering to their televisions at home. But author Susan Sontag warned that we run the risk of losing our ability to respond as violent images dominate contemporary media. She voiced fear that, instead of awakening our awareness as was accomplished during the Vietnam War coverage, the continuous barrage of graphic images would cause desensitisation (Sontag, 2003) especially when by 1968, at the height of the war, there were about 600 accredited journalists of all nationalities in Vietnam (Spector, 2016). Journalist Elisa Gabbert examines this further and suggests that constant acts of violence could not generate true compassion for individuals who are oppressed, but rather disengagement (Gabbert, 2018).

When examining how Western interventions manage media narratives in difficult circumstances such as the Gulf War, this caution is crucial. The military is subject to strict controls by the media, which presents the government's view of effective operations and precise targeting. Nevertheless, this approach tends to glorify powerful actions while

downplaying the constant uncertainty of occupation. It is important to comprehend the varying rates of loss in order to fully comprehend the consequences of violence. A well-staged resolution runs the risk of misrepresenting reality as leaders employ deft imagery and the public grows weary of sympathy (Walker, 1995).

Looking at the long-term consequences of conflicts provides valuable insights that go beyond the dramatic and fleeting moments. Dedicated artists provide means of turning our attention away from the acts of violence and towards the people suffering for years as a result of previous power struggles. Their meticulous pictures bring to light often overlooked but profound details found in ruined landscapes. The enduring struggles of communities that were occupied and later abandoned due to shifting political priorities are envisioned in these artworks. They invite audiences to reevaluate personal narratives that persist in a quiet way over time, even after the focus of the media has shifted.

Art from such conflict driven narratives, implies that deep significance persists in forgotten places, which can reawaken feelings and connections if we look at familiar sites differently. This is especially important if continuous upsetting news threatens to numb public emotions. Visions of art that remain suggest that scars are visible longer than the disturbing initial moments of violence that are temporary.

Through her patient documentary works, photographer Sophie Ristelhueber explores how conflict depictions might alleviate the effects of compassion fatigue, which is a result of violent news stories gradually eroding public awareness and response across media platforms. In a similar vein, Susan Meiselas, an artist known for her poetic collages that highlight the subtle aftereffects of conflict, believes that attentive "understanding of history is critical to imagining beyond limits of what one knows", during intense events that frequently numb perception. (Meiselas 2023)

Similar to this, An-My Lê's images of the Vietnamese countryside capture dangers in perceptions. They piece together abstract impressions of a homeland where she was

uprooted from her childhood and fled communist rule in the aftermath of the war, eventually arriving in America. According to MoMA, she provides a wealth of material for thought by implying that cyclical organised violence and recurrent relational dynamics imprint early and late industrialisation on organised violence through beautifully depressing studies that allude to larger themes. (MoMA 2023) In addition, combining immersive documentary styles protects emotional connection from apathy.

The complex techniques used by Ristelhueber, Meiselas, and Lê cause us to consider the risks associated with conflict photography as well as the ways in which it may be related to ethical issues. In this essay firstly we will investigate the circumstances that allow the spread of imagery to numb larger audiences before we can apply lessons learned. Thereafter, an in-depth examination of Ristelhueber's aftermath gazes will evaluate how her ideas reorient knowledge from products to processes- the minute ripples that keep reshaping the impacted individuals and locations, along with analysis of other similar artists. Lastly, we will discuss how these methods have impacted journalism traditions and motivated projects like my own borderland's photography project in Kashmir. Through diaristic images tracing worn signage and accounts from survivors profiled over repeated excursions, my projects there investigate lasting impacts beyond headlines. Similar to Ristelhueber in Kuwait, I steadily maintain my attention on resonances across time in damaged areas that are simple to ignore.

Chapter 1 - Compassion Fatigue and the Numbing Effects of Clichéd War Imagery

In her book *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sells Disease, Famine, War, and Death*, media scholar Susan Moeller makes the case that the "frenzied" 24-hour news environment fosters "compassion fatigue" by continuously bombarding readers with coverage that conceals comprehension of the scope of the issue (Moeller, 1999). In contrast to brief exposures to violent imagery that enable extraordinary events to profoundly affect audience

conscience, persistent content overload causes ignorance to spread more from the sheer volume of data than any one crisis deserves. In her analysis of Moeller's research on escalating cycles for The Guardian, Elisa Gabbert observes that "war and famine become boring when they are constant because we have seen it all before." The only way to arouse interest in your audience beyond apathy is to make every catastrophe seem worse.

According to Moeller's analysis of a 1995 Pew Research study on international coverage, she says that in a global game of shock value and one-upmanship, such competitive breakthroughs depend on ever-more "dramatic and violent" imagery. (Gabbert, 2018)

Habitual exposure to violent media imagery risks diminishing natural empathic responses over time by unconsciously recalibrating the neural networks in our brain governing motivation and relevance appraisal (Cantor, 2003). This manifests in verifiable real-world aggression escalation among frequent adult viewers according to synthesis of contemporary research (Krahé et al., 2011). Adolescents meanwhile remain especially susceptible as their social cognition forms, with multiple studies confirming higher tolerance levels translating to amplified harm against peers (Recovery, 2023). Simply put, continual consumption of imagery depicting human suffering stripped of context or resonance gradually conditions involuntary emotional apathy on a neurological level. Watching violent media, especially when it involves extreme hostilities or graphic injury displays, causes viewers to have intense emotional reactions. However, viewers' emotional reactions to depictions of violence and pain frequently lessen with time and with repeated exposure. By becoming less sensitive to violence young adults can fall into a pattern similar to addiction where they look for increasingly graphic and violent content to 'experience the feeling created by violence' (Recovery, 2023). So, whether evaluations determine stimuli meaningless enough to filter out or overwhelming enough to protect psyche by numbing response circuits, outcomes still trend towards normalised indifference as the only rational adaptation strategy against an onslaught deemed unstoppable. With mass entertainment and news media both incentivised to prioritise sensational imagery for competitive advantage, the presently absent ethical

constraints and structural safeguards become society's only hope for restoring intrinsic empathy currently endangered by over-exposure.

The very tool that photography once revived now runs the risk of provoking an arms race chasing ultra-violent spectacle just to cut down on compassion overload, with such exhaustion numbing mass awareness against needed empathy. According to a Denver Post analysis, this kind of weariness has also been observed in formerly passionate cause activists, nonprofit employees, journalists, and creatives who have become overly engrossed in trauma. Photography has to change in order to revive what the barrage has drowned when everyone runs the risk of becoming numb. (Gabbert, 2018)

Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin were appalled by the frequent use of violent imagery when judging the 2008 World Press Photo Awards; entries appeared to be separated only by contrasting backgrounds surrounding intense moments devoid of depth. The artists considered how we've exchanged pictures of human suffering without providing much consideration for the context, alternatives, or responsibility attribution. This was prompted by the astounding volume of these submissions. They pointed out that we frequently lack agency in our "insatiable hunger" for such intense foreign scenes. The statement made earlier by Susan Sontag—"sight can be turned off; we have lids on our eyes" (Broomberg & Chanarin, 2014) - remains true. In the midst of this flooding of excessive consumption, our eyes slip, we can't help but peek at it and Barthes describes it perfectly.

Conflict photography, according to Roland Barthes, encourages "sharing the moment without feeling implicated or responsible for what we are seeing." Rather than a risky, conscious awakening, our gaze indulges in horror selectively from a protected distance. "Someone has shuddered for us; reflected for us, judged for us; the photographer has left us nothing," he concluded, going beyond the shallow conclusions about the darkness of the world that are held comfortably in the distance. Cycles are maintained by this resigned, passive voyeurism. (Broomberg & Chanarin, 2014)

The argument was furthered by Susan Sontag, who wrote that "war making and picture taking are congruent activities"—commercial news spectacle and state war machinery are intertwined with professional interests (Broomberg & Chanarin, 2014). As viewers take in large amounts of meaningless visuals, military messaging remains uncontested. If the packaged message is that the medium is growing, cultural resignation runs the risk of normalising inequality without acknowledging the tension of the truth. Nevertheless, as Sontag posed the question: How might creative changes require a fresh commitment to identifying common threads connecting seemingly separate spirits who are yelling silent screams in scores of pictures that are scrolling past unfocused eyes? If empathy carries the risk of exhaustion, aftermath substitutes call for its reawakening.

As the spectacle of violence fades, it's subtle aftereffects can still be seen in individuals and locations, as patient documentary gazes reveal. Decades later, Sophie Ristelhueber's images of the wreckage remain, painstakingly documenting the marks that just missed erasure - her work doesn't show any explicit bodies or blood or the arc of war images we are used to, instead she meticulously shoots the aftermath, which reawakens recognition and the mind starts to think how and why the earth came to be that way. Similarly, Susan Meiselas creates spaces that withstand the effects of history's scrubbing struggle while allowing glimpses of the past into the present. She records with such intensity the lives of those being erased, she takes her time to document and is almost like a detective, gathering evidence to back up the truth. She leaves no room for anyone to argue that it didn't happen. Together, they and many other artists serve as examples of more extensive techniques for regaining our sense of awareness of the effects of war by listening to bullet holes that continue to tell tales through largely deaf walls that have been punctured by malicious intent. Refocusing on the long-lasting effects of aftermaths makes conscience larger and accountability clearer once we choose to think about, and not dismiss, the unintended liabilities of conflict that will eventually become an issue. This is preferable to closing our eyes at times when there is no context or peace.

Chapter 2 - Ristelhueber's, Meiselas's and An My Lê's Enduring Aftermath

Gazes Revealing Reverberations

Artist An-My Lê left war-torn Vietnam as a young refugee, travelling across continents in search of safety, and then returned using a camera to reassemble her fragmented heritage. The statement, "the landscape seems to have recovered and managed to retain and exude that sense of



Fig 1 - An-My Lê, Untitled, Son Tay, 1998, from the series Việt Nam

culture and history that can signal that one has arrived home," is visually represented in her expansive depictions of farmed agricultural plots. Every trench and crop grid restores generational ties to places where culture and food flourished prior to bombs and deprivation dividing families and severing children from ancestral land. (Guggenheim, 2023)

The serene image by Lê of lush fields scattered over foggy mountain ridge lines and crops dotted amongst homes, captures the currents that reestablish connections between individuals, locations, and cultures that have been violently fragmented through conflict's pollution. Her reserved gazes resonate returning visions where tactical violence once deemed the countryside mere spatial pawns within the war. She has admitted in statements that she had a nostalgic childhood longing for "fantasising about this traditional agricultural way of life through folktales [conveying the] joys of living close to nature in a large, close-knit family" (Aperture, 2023). However, as seasons pass and combat's heavier footsteps

gradually recede across softer lands, tending soil proves more resilient than any empire. Through sights reconciling split, "one has finally arrived home," in her words. Now, every bullet fosters flowers instead of tear gas, and cycles restore land that welcomes those who sow peace instead of danger. Similarly to Lê, I also have the same nostalgia, I grew up on farms and lived in large close-knit families. I know what that yearning feels like, and we all have this universal longing for our land, and Lê captures that very well in her images.

An-My Lê's images of her hometown's fields do more than just heal family ties torn apart by war. This land's natural cycles have universal significance. Lê's ancestral acres are still producing grain in spite of temporary difficulties, demonstrating a deeper reality about the connection between people and the land. The earth's surface may have once been strewn by bullets, but its need for seasons and continuous photosynthesis has not changed. Nor has it been impacted by divisions in borders or split societies. Lê depicts steady scenes in the midst of temporary changes through serene landscapes, where the land and labourers endure across eras, unaffected by fleeting events. Bomb craters become part of the land's story, turning tears into golden grains, and the homeland finds a place again in the hearts of those lands that wait through eternity for their cultivators to return. It is this resilience that helps guide and shift focus from war-centric coverage toward more people-focused practices journalism urgently requires.

Months after the oil fires subsided, French photographer Sophie Ristelhueber travelled to Kuwait to begin her artistic documentation of textures traced across battlegrounds in the scarred desert, which she titled "Fait" – or "Fact" – an extended meditation. Her photographic act, which centralises eroded evidence etched along the land itself without providing a caption for the causes or forces behind it, reorients consciousness towards the long-lasting effects of major geopolitical gambits on humble grounds they temporarily scar.

Her large format
aerial portrait, "Fait
No 20," shows
trenches zigzagging
like scars across the
smooth desert floors.
The once
unblemished earth,
now overwritten with
harm, echoes
struggles that were
brief, but the earth
still holds the



*Fig 2 - Fait No 20, 1992 Colour photograph mounted on aluminium, 100x127x5 cm
Fait is a series of photographs taken six months after the end of the first Gulf War*

evidence. The only remnants and latent ripples from world events that were televised worldwide but were later shelved once goals were shifted, are described in her photos. (Poynor , 2015)

The broken earth is invited "to occupy the entire frame" by her structured compositional style, with scorched sand and stone exposed as the main character and patient narrator. In an essay called "Desert Stories, or Faith in Facts" within Martin Lister's book "The Photographic Image in Digital Culture," art critic Ian Walker discusses Sophie Ristelhueber's documentary methods. In an era when concerns about the medium's declining influence and efficacy due to the spread of digital technology or an excess of traumatic photos are rampant, he advises that her creative methods investigate the significant potential of photography. He also commends her for cutting out the drama while maintaining a factual and poetic gaze that "restores the complex rhizomatic web of contingency and unintended consequences that every unilateral action triggers" over a community landscape that

changes over much longer time arcs than brief upheavals. (Walker, 1995) Her factual framings draw attention to the land's persistent voice and its visitors.

Sophie Ristelhueber's well-organised investigations of resonances left in waking stir far beyond first spectacle and broaden consciousness rather than limiting it with merely visceral reaction to events captured in mid-fury photography. Her centralised, neatly straight aftermath compositions clear visual space, opening up profound potential for gradually deciphering the subtler effects of war, in contrast to habitual violent tableaux of chaos that numb compassion through spectacle overload. These persistent "rescue missions target hidden details and obscured sides to every event that the daily hubbub rushes past." (Walker, 1995)

The enduring gazes of Ristelhueber refocus attention on civilians who are surviving crossfire after the public's attention has been diverted. Her post-conflict excavations bring to light the resonances of war, which are whispers through walls that aren't falling apart but are nonetheless punctured. With time, we learn that such horrific memories are difficult to deal with even when the tragedy has passed; we block out noises that remind us of the burning corpse and the heartbroken loss. However, through the aftermath dimension that spares the excess of sensation, awareness grows, and the implications become more apparent. Gradually, we narrow our eyes as bullet indicators weave through people's lives, tending to a strange flower. Beyond comfortable retreat towards perspectives that resensitise by modifying rather than attacking cognition, vision must change. That's where wisdom develops.

Following criticism over the anti-war sentiment generated by uncensored Vietnam reportage, the Pentagon used government "Pool Systems" to closely monitor subsequent press embeds. This involved using centralised distribution channels to preserve editorial control and restrict reporter access. (Ariele P, 2014) To enable calculated public relations manoeuvres, authorities restricted journalistic mobility and transparency rather than

permitting unrestricted early glimpses. These moves skilfully turned the focus from burning battlefields to staged victory celebrations, resulting in a choreography that entered spotlights, crafted stories, and then veered off course, all with long-lasting effects.

Photographer Susan Meiselas spent almost thirty years immersively capturing Kurdish villages resisting tyranny starting in 1978, unlike short, embedded journalism excursions. Her first encounter with refugees on the journey instilled in her a "bond of responsibility" to continue using photography to raise awareness of the unrecognised crisis (East, 2019).

She created collages that bring together testimonies, old photos, family albums, projections, maps, and illustrated books from the Kurdish diaspora in almost unbearable detail to reveal the war's pervasive yet hidden enduring repercussions. As one article notes, her devotion remains "as steadfast as their suffering has been long" (East, 2019). Rebuilding carefully cultivated trust opens doors to previously unheard-of insights into terrible campaigns that engulf entire regions, such as the Anfal genocide committed under Saddam Hussein's administration. Her access highlights the pain that is readily disregarded on a global scale when news spectacles shift rapidly to new locations.

Meiselas proposes an overdue realignment in journalism morality in her extensive field investigation that explicitly records crimes against Kurds behind censors: What distortions arise from unique narrow viewpoints on complicated problems if compassion narrows along selective coverage lines, failing to motivate action or conscience sufficiently to fight the worst tyrannies? Her perseverance prompts deeper questions.

Chapter 3 - Inspiring Journalistic Evolution Through Artistic Influence

The artists mentioned above are taking a step away from the present-day climate of war journalism. War journalism has various characteristics that the mass media possess when

What does a Peace Journalist do? This is the Original table by Prof Johan Galtung¹⁰

PEACE/CONFLICT JOURNALISM	WAR/VIOLENCE JOURNALISM
I. PEACE/CONFLICT-ORIENTATED explore conflict formation, x parties, y goals, z issues general "win, win" orientation open space, open time; causes and outcomes anywhere, also in history/culture making conflicts transparent giving voice to all parties; empathy, understanding see conflict/war as problem, focus on conflict creativity humanisation of all sides; more so the worse the weapons proactive: prevention before any violence/war occurs focus on invisible effects of violence (trauma and glory, damage to structure/culture)	I. WAR/VIOLENCE ORIENTATED Focus on conflict arena, 2 parties, 1 goal (win), war general zero-sum orientation Closed space, closed time; causes and exits in arena, who threw the first stone making wars opaque/secret "us-them" journalism, propaganda, voice, for "us" see "them" as the problem, focus on who prevails in war dehumanisation of "them"; more so the worse the weapon reactive: waiting for violence before reporting focus only on visible effect of violence (killed, wounded and material damage)
II. TRUTH-ORIENTATED Expose untruths on all sides / uncover all cover-ups	II. PROPAGANDA-ORIENTATED Expose "their" untruths / help "our" cover-ups/lies
III. PEOPLE-ORIENTATED Focus on suffering all over; on women, aged children, giving voice to voiceless Give name to all evil-doers Focus on people peace-makers	III. ELITE ORIENTATED Focus on "our" suffering; on able-bodied elite males, being their mouth-piece give name to their evil-doers focus on elite peace-makers
IV. SOLUTION ORIENTATED Peace = non-violence + creativity Highlight peace initiatives, also to prevent more war Focus on structure, culture, the peaceful society Aftermath: resolution, reconstruction, reconciliation	IV. VICTORY ORIENTATED Peace = victory + ceasefire Conceal peace-initiative, before victory is at hand Focus on treaty, institution, the controlled society Leaving for another war, return if the old flares up again

Fig 3 – John Galtung, table of what does a peace journalist do, 1969

covering conflict, the first one being the use of propaganda like the pentagons' usage of pool systems in Iraq as mentioned earlier. The second being a bias towards political and economic elites, an example would be elites in our society controlling the mass media to their benefit, hence also having control over the flow and content of news that is being circulated to the general public. An example of such is Rupert Murdoch - former CEO of 21st Century Fox (Parent company of Fox News). The co-chairman of 21st Century which owns

The Wall Street Journal and other publications. Altogether, “his family controls 120 newspapers across five countries” (Vinton, 2016), showing us that conflict news stories can and may well be used as narratives for elitist agendas.

The problem in journalism today is the focus on violence, we are reactive: waiting for violence before reporting, focus only on visible effect of violence (killed, wounded and material damage) (Mcgoldrick and Lynch, 2000). How does this help the spread of information and pain, specifically in war and peace journalism? 'Peace Journalism' was coined in the 1970s by Johan Galtung, a peace professor and director of the TRANSCEND Peace and Development Network (Mcgoldrick and Lynch, 2000). There is also an emphasis on victory or the winner/loser mindset. This type of media coverage tends to create a biased picture of each conflict under consideration, oversimplifying what is happening to those involved. Creating more opportunity for compassion fatigue to take over. How much brain numbing content do we need to see to say 'all life is precious'? In this obsession for a winner or a loser we forget it is humanity that is being lost. Shouldn't this be the goal of war and peace photography? To showcase the grief, guilt and loss felt on both sides of conflict rather than paint a biased picture of a world where the loss of life leads to what the world accepts victory.

War/violence-oriented journalism is unknowingly leading the race for compassion fatigue in modern society, we need to move toward a more people, peace and solution-oriented way of reporting when it comes to modern day conflict and violence. As stated by Professor Johan Galtung in his original table, (cited above) War/Violence journalism focuses on a conflict arena where within 2 parties there is one goal – to win which leads to a general zero-sum orientation (Mcgoldrick and Lynch, 2000). This type of media coverage tends to create a biased picture of each conflict under consideration, oversimplifying what is happening to those involved within a closed space – what were the causes? Who led the conflict? Who threw the first stone? This is obscured by propaganda with the media weaponised as a voice

to support one side in an “us vs them” narrative. Always seeing “them” as the problem (Mcgoldrick and Lynch, 2000).

We need to move away from these practices to ethical alternatives like looking at things through a lens of peace journalism. This can be done by presenting a more sensitive style of conflict reporting with an orientation towards truth—outlining the various parties involved in the conflict and exposing the suffering and cover-ups of all parties. Instead of being elite orientated, we need to focus on real people affected - reporting the narratives of people from all levels of society, not just the ‘decision-makers’. There needs to be a clear conflict focus where we look at the roots of said conflict to better understand the grievances of involved parties, not just the symptoms of conflict; Meiselas is the perfect example of this as her whole career is a testament to going against the conventional norms of “touch and go” photography where unlike a “reporter who drops into a country for a relatively short period of time, files a story or handful of dispatches, and then leaves” (Martin, 2011), she involved herself for almost thirty years documenting and capturing Kurdish villages resisting tyranny, through her lens. The solution to a victory orientated state of conflict is to shift narratives toward solution orientated states of reporting where we highlight peace initiatives and focus on the aftermath: the resolution, reconciliation and reconstruction of society.

Journalism today needs to focus on incorporating the pain into its art by staying with the victims of conflict in solidarity to accurately capture its lasting impact. The Journalist should not be a fleeting moment, like Meiselas, the idea is to go against the norm of “parachute journalism”. If we can solve this issue of dedication and connection to their content from such journalists, the space of peace and conflict photojournalism would move a step in the right direction. This is something I, as a practitioner, would like to implement in ongoing and future projects.

While the move from war and violence photography toward a more peace and solution orientated shift in Journalism is a positive one, the issue of compassion fatigue remains.

Sontag argues “To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them that they can never have. It turns people into objects that can be ‘symbolically possessed’, just as a camera is a sublimation of the gun, to photograph someone is a subliminal murder – a soft murder, appropriate to a sad, frightened time”. How many of these soft murders of real conflict does one take for the world to turn its gaze to the horrors that come from it? In this day and age, photos of conflict are in such abundance, and we are bombarded with them so constantly that we are becoming increasingly numb to the gruesome reality of conflict.

Chloe Pantazi, writing for Salon, about a new exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, which showcased over 400 images of violence without context. The photographs were not organised chronologically, or grouped together with images pertaining to conflicts they depict. Rather, the exhibit “seeks to offer a more comprehensive exploration of the type of images created in any conflict, without regard to era or nationality... Instead, they are arranged according to the general progression of every war (Pantazi, 2014). She argues that photos presented with the detritus of war where “disparate limbs, burned bodies and blistered flesh” are showcased in an almost “grossly eroticised” way where it almost becomes a game, a challenge: “How long viewers bear to look at a gruesome photograph before moving on”. This leads to becoming “increasingly numb to the violence of images and their impact begins to wane”. In her landmark polemic *On Photography* (1977), Susan Sontag argued that a photograph alone cannot determine an event; rather, an event must precede a photo. “Living with the photographed images of the suffering...does not necessarily strengthen conscience and the ability to be compassionate... Once one has seen such images, one has started down the road of seeing more—and more. Images transfix”. Images anaesthetise. This is compassion fatigue, and we are bombarded with them every day in different forms, whether it be your social-media algorithm showcasing the many photos of ongoing conflict in the middle east every day or the news channels about the

Russia/Ukraine situation. The issue remains, how do we resensitise the public to the horrors of conflict?

Berger wrote, "We have to situate the printed photograph so that it acquires something of the surprising conclusiveness of that which it was and is." (Pantazi, 2014). The complex techniques used by Ristelhueber, Meiselas, and L  cause us to consider the

risks associated with conflict photography as well as the ways in which it may be related to

ethical issues. In this essay firstly we will investigate the circumstances that allow the spread

of imagery to numb larger audiences before we can apply lessons learned. I started to talk more to my subjects on my excursions, going into people's homes, seeing their archives of imagery and just merely having a cup of tea was enough for that person to drop their guard and open up to me as a person. I have learnt that the camera can be intimidating, so I almost always strike conversation to make my subject more comfortable. And this is noticeable in my photos. Sometimes I'll just be taking pictures and someone will catch my eye, and I will take a couple of images, some where they are unaware, they are being photographed in the moment where they have just realised that they are being photographed. And it is wonderful to see them open up to me as I strike conversation and begin documenting them.



Fig 4 – Muhammad Khan, Athmuqam, Neelum valley, Azad Kashmir 2022



Fig 5 - Muhammad Khan, after tea, Athmuqam, Neelum valley, Azad Kashmir 2022

These photos were taken during my last excursion to Azad Kashmir in 2022, where I travelled along the Neelum river and through the valley which borders India. I came across this gentleman and his friend who were sitting having a break. They had tea and walnuts and they shared them with me and my uncle. His name was Muhammad. His friend and him were sitting around a little fire. The main conversation was around gratitude and how he wants his kids to have a good education. We talked about the lack of tourism and how dangerous times had become voicing his regard for people like myself who still had connections to their homeland and that I had a voice I could use to raise awareness about the troubled region and its difficulties.

I listened to the stories and took notes instead of rushing them. While others chase headlines, I have conversations and learn people's truths. My camera accompanies courteous artists, showcasing people involved in bitter land disputes. If patience leads to a

deeper understanding, I still have a lot to learn from my continued exploration of these important lands, keeping an open mind to learn more about their histories.



Fig 6 – Zobia Ahmed, Lakkar, (wood), Athmuqam, Neelum valley, Azad Kashmir 2022



Fig 7- Zobia Ahmed, Neelum valley tours and travels, Keran, Neelum Valley, Azad Kashmir 2022

Apart from portraiture I also like to focus on the landscapes. These two images are my favourite from that trip to Kashmir and I think they are more important than my portraits as they hold more information and make the viewer think. Back in the day, there was a lot of tourism in the valley of Neelum, it boasted lush green valleys and fresh clear rushing glacial rivers but these days it's mostly under curfew and there is limited access allowed due to tensions between the countries of India and Pakistan. The region has been disputed ever since the partition in 1947, and clashes often break out between the armies even though there is an “official ceasefire” and line of control. This causes a lot of unrest and disruptions. As a result, these resorts sit empty and the once colourful and bright banners are tattered

and torn, telling tales of what once used to be a bustling centre of beauty where people came from miles around to witness. The second image is of logs cut up ready to be transported to places that need them, they will be used as fuel for fire but mostly as building material as our homes are mostly made from wood. They will be cut and transported and stored whilst there is a moment of peace and the firing is stopped, and eventually when there is shelling, they will have the material ready to rebuild. This image in my eyes really captures Kashmiri resilience and that's something I would like to pursue in my career.

Like mindful photographers uncovering hidden conflict resonances, I document Kashmir's resilient culture that has withstood decades of conflict in these regions. My unwavering perspective respects generations that have followed connected to cherished homelands, disrupted by bitter disagreements that split formerly unified villages with ageless rhythms that are now deeply carved like canyons.

Conclusion

Widespread use of modern-day technology makes it almost impossible to not see violent conflict images all the time. We run the risk of normalising this suffering into the background and eventually wear down empathy due to overexposure. Sontag observed that being "Flooded with images of the sort that once used to shock and arouse indignation, we are losing our capacity to react". Overexposure to these images that may have formerly provoked outrage puts us as a society at risk of becoming incapable of responding appropriately.

Once the initial flare-ups disappear from the headlines, artists such as Sophie Ristelhueber, Susan Meiselas, and An-My Lê present lingering gazes prolonged upon human truths, gently developing across long-term wounds. Their meticulous documentary methods provide a counterbalance to the deafening bombardment of violent news. When taken as a whole, their works highlight the subtle, long-lasting effects that violence has on spaces, memories, and lives—effects that persist longer than the use of violence to resolve conflicts.

Given the way deadlines have always shaped news reporting, I hope that my unwavering patience will draw attention to the people who are enduring until peace returns to their unstable homelands. We must work towards healing and cultivate compassion by acknowledging our common scars on this same Earth in a world that frequently closes its heart. Before time goes beyond our control, each of us should make an effort to heal.

As a young photographer from Kashmir, I am inspired by these artists who patiently portray suffering that is often overlooked. My goal is to inspire compassion beyond short-term headlines by capturing real lives shaped by dividing tensions within communities. I attempt to not use a single lens that blocks the whole picture and place a high importance on patience in bringing about more peace. As an ongoing focus in my work, I'm dedicated to filling in the factual gaps and listening to stories that only time can fully heal.

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