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Question 1:

Using at least 3 examples, consider how image makers have utilized digital technology to explore at least one of the following: Conflict, the Environment, Identity, the Surveillance State, the Technology Society?

In this essay I will be focusing on how technology has helped artists explore topics of conflict in more developed and unique ways; mainly covering Virtual Reality as well as other relevant sub-topics and areas of interest such as related subjects, articles and work.

I will be looking at how the recent advancement in technology, specifically VR and how it has been implemented in artworks that relate to conflict.

To begin with, technology has developed into having a wider diversity of uses throughout the world especially within the domain of conflict, to the point where we now have soldiers who struggle with hearing drones every time they sleep as opposed to having shell shock and such.

Comparing this advancement in technology and looking at image making specifically, we started using more fragile and difficult ways such as glass plate negatives and pocket film cameras that gave no freedom over being able to change the shot other than its framing and angle from the lens. Later, we created the digital ability to take photos which allowed war photographers to produce a lot more work which can be stored in abundance in their collection of sim cards SIM cards ensuring that they covered as much as possible while out and taking such a huge risk being in active combat areas.

The ability to use a quicker shutter speed came in and this allowed for things like drones to capture photos while being controlled and insanely fast objects to be captured with no sign of blurred movement, this allowed photos to be like a film still from an action film and it showed how in reality there is immense detail in violence and conflict.

Technology is almost making it more cinematic in a way as opposed to being a more gradual process to understand on translating the photo in increments visually and emotionally instead of understanding the context instantly in HD.

Thread 1:

“Many photographers started portraying the misery, pain and confusion that was the reality of warfare. “

(Peter Osnos, The Atlantic, 2013, p3)

This is a quote from an article about how time and technology have revolutionized the ways of photography and it made me think about how overly saturated we are in the current age by conflict and violence and how different it must have been to be exposed to war photography at a time when it was strange for the public to get a glimpse of the fragments of war.

Now photographers can capture images from safe spaces by learning the use of a drone and its functions which almost completely changes the original element of war photography that we are used to seeing. I feel that a selling point of war photography is knowing there is a man out there with a camera instead of a rifle, and that he is in just as much danger as everyone else. Many of the photos were taken with handheld film cameras, a very tedious and much more dangerous concept as opposed to being able to see the conflict from miles away and through a screen.

Now I want to focus specifically on Virtual Reality and its use in the photographic and journalistic industry and how it has been utilized to represent or reflect on conflict.

Violence and conflict have traditionally been viewed in digital and physical print / format which is usually enough to engage with the context of the photo and its historical / social impacts as long as it is a quality image.

Following this, showing the effects and implications of war through virtual reality will have more of a realistic effect and it allows for a more detailed or fair judgement on areas of conflict and the remains of war. I think virtual reality will be a much larger scale topic and I think that more art should be viewed in this manner. It allows an artist to completely change the destination of the person wearing one, it can be ultra realistic or surreal, and it transforms spaces and areas without having to alter the physical space.

Here are some artists that have used Virtual Reality and combined it with the element of conflict, war and violence within their work. I have chosen these because they all use Virtual Reality in some way, however the way they use the technology and the context of their piece and how it collides with conflict are all truly individual.

Karim Ben Khelifa's *The Enemy* (2018)

“The Enemy” is an innovative virtual reality art piece by artist and journalist Karim Ben Khelifa that explores the complexities of global conflicts by applying a more humanized experience in his work. The work immerses participants in a virtual environment where they experience lifelike, 3D representations of soldiers or fighters from opposing factions / fronts, who candidly share their personal stories, motivations, and fears.

There are multiple individuals who explain and discuss their stories whilst standing at the other end of the room. There is a portrait of their real-life versions on the wall behind them and in front stands a life-sized digitally rendered version of themselves that matches their movement and body language whilst doing their dialogue alongside their voice recording which makes for a more candid and life like encounter.

Thread 2:

“You have something here you don’t have in any other form of journalism: body language.”

(Coralie Kraft, confront the enemy article, 2017, p3)

I like this quote because it summarizes what I would pick up on and what makes the experience feel the most real. There is always the fact that the room changes when you put the goggles on but to be interacting and witnessing someone else explain their struggles and journey through conflict all whilst seeing their body language and expression would make it very realistic and harrowing.

This interactive experience blurs the boundaries between art, journalism, and technology, encouraging viewers to confront their biases and conceptions about "the enemy." This work reminds me of JR's work and how he intentionally wants viewers to confront themselves and the problems of conflict around them. Specifically in the title "The enemy" it is almost hinting at being a reflective piece on discovering other people's points of view and the cause they fight for. I like how the collection of documentation all gets used and put into the most realistic version of it you can receive and hear from them, and it is the most authentic interpretation you could try to simulate to feel "in-person".

Thread 3:



Thread 4:



Thread 5:

“The Enemy brings you face-to-face with combatants from three conflict zones: with the Maras in Salvador, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and in Israel and Palestine. Their testimonies and confessions about their lives, experiences, and perspectives on war will allow you to better understand their motivations... and their humanity.” (KARIM BEN KHELIFA, THE ENEMY, 2017, P6)

This quote is from the work's own website, and it helps describe to the viewer the intentions of Karim Ben Khelifa and how they want their viewers to engage with the art and render in the voices and stories of the individuals used in the piece. This immediately shows us that there is an immediate focus on the personalities and individuality of experiences through conflict and how the artist wishes for the viewers to engage with the work on a more personal and emotional level as opposed to reading these stories via text or regular video.

The use of modern-day technology (VR) in this piece represents conflict in a new and refreshing way for people to view and I feel that it is also a more impactful form of media to receive and translate such work from. This may be a more efficient way for people to

understand conflict when it can be photographically represented in a more personal and heartfelt way.

The element of the headset also helps remove the distractions of the outside world and it really narrows down a viewer's focus as it gets people to feel present in the virtual world instead of being between them, making art pieces feel fully engageable and interactive. I feel like there is a certain level or representation of war photography that people would argue wouldn't be appropriate to experience on a VR such as works like "Napalm Girl".

Thread 6:

"By allowing those who carry out the violence to explain who they are and what their motives and dreams are, the project challenges views held by all sides and ultimately humanizes the combatants. I provide no answers. Instead, I aim to provide an experience and stimulate a discussion beyond easy rhetoric." (KARIM BEN KHELIFA, THE ENEMY, 2017, P2)

This is a quote from an online report by Karim and he explains how he wanted the whole creation and experience of it to let people speak up for themselves to tell their own story instead of misconceptions being spread about "groups" and makes it a look into individuals' perspectives on it. I think it is a piece that urges for discussion especially because the experience is a one-way conversation and as he mentions no questions get answered by him and it is simply just people explaining themselves and where they are involved or impacted in it all.

Thread 7:

“Really, it is about the fidelity of the body language and the spatial engagement with people that are usually very far apart.” (Sharon Lacey, FACE TO FACE WITH THE ENEMY 2016, p4)

This quote is from an article about “The Enemy” which states that the use of VR technology fills in the spaces where engagement and authenticity could be filled in, especially in the eyes of a journalist or a creative who wants to express something with the utmost passion or truth. He also mentions the body language factor and how that plays a role in what persuades and sways the viewer to take a different approach to the immersive and life-like similarities that it brings out in its recorded subjects.

“*The Enemy*” seeks to foster empathy and understanding, highlighting the shared experiences of individuals often seen only through a one-sided mirror. It is a powerful example of how VR can be used as a storytelling medium to address complex political issues, challenging viewers to reflect on the nature of conflict and the possibility of the damage it can have on people and the environments that have suffered from it. Khelifa’s work pushes the potential of immersive technologies and how we view photographs. This piece focuses also on elements of identity and the personal lives of whom the conflicts effects.

Harun Farocki's *Serious Games* (2009)

German filmmaker and artist Harun Farocki uses digital video and computer simulations in his “*Serious Games*” series to investigate the intersection of war, technology, and virtual reality.

The work juxtaposes footage of soldiers training in simulated combat environments with images of actual conflict zones. By using digital technologies like VR training programs and combining them with documentary aesthetics, Farocki critiques the gamification of warfare and explores how technology shapes perceptions of conflict. His work reflects on the dehumanization and abstraction of war through the lens of digital representation. It is interesting to note that this artist interferes with how the real and the fake conflict with each other. I can see how this artist may be looking at how games glorify violence and how war games reward the ideologies of conflict and violence through digital media such as games or virtual reality.

Thread 8:



Thread 9:



I think this work has aged and come a long way since its first initial launch as it is now a lot more popular for people to be playing violent games and simulators with no precaution.

This artist focuses on that precaution with people who interact with these things specifically soldiers and how VR has provided to recruit, train and help apply therapy.

It is almost strange to see a soldier in uniform playing a game / simulator however it is important to note that this covers a variety of areas including preparation, practice and recovery which is sometimes the harder battle for some soldiers. Harun Farocki references this technology and physicalizes its use to consider how the US army uses fictional scenarios to tend and assist vets with real life problems and struggles such as post-traumatic stress disorder.

Thread 10:

“Farocki explores the connection between virtual reality and the military – how the fictional scenarios of computer games are used both in the training of U.S. troops prior to their deployment in combat zones, and in psychological care for troops suffering battlefield trauma upon their return.” (Haron Farocki, 2009, Harun Farocki, p1)

In this quote I feel he slightly picks up on the possible negatives of it as he mentions how they are both used before and after as if it is part of him now or something that soldiers must routinely use through and after service. It also described how he mentions video games and mentions how the fictional scenarios are used prior to their deployment. He took an early liking in capturing this when he did because since 2009 it is being used a lot more heavily and is relied upon much more. This hints towards the reliability we have on tech in current times and how the judgement of VR being referred to as game-like has shifted to a professional and serious standard in military use such as drones and VR simulations.

although I feel the artist is bringing attention to the cause and how it may be impactful in a positive way, I do think it is important to also note the other implications of his work such as how they are treating problems that happen in reality with the non-real, to almost compensate for all the bad, they “comfort and heal” hurt soldiers with VR in a fake realm they may get reliant upon or grow false belief around.

Christian Stephens' Welcome To Aleppo (2009)

Using cutting-edge VR technology and state of the art 360* cameras, the piece transports the audience to Aleppo, a Syrian city that became a symbol of destruction and resilience during the civil war.

The work combines documentary footage with artistic interventions, offering a visceral, firsthand perspective on the conflict's impact on civilians and urban infrastructure. By situating viewers in the midst of bombed-out buildings, deserted streets, and makeshift shelters, it emphasizes the human cost of war and challenges the detachment often associated with consuming news about distant tragedies. We as foreign viewers are placed into a single moment where we can visually comprehend the true aftermath of modern-day conflict and how areas such as Syria are being abundantly impacted by it.

"Welcome to Aleppo" goes beyond standard documentation; it is an opportunity to empathize and reflect. The immersive medium heightens emotional engagement, making it impossible to ignore the value of life and the resilience of those who are being forced or are choosing to be caught somewhere in the crossfire. The artwork confronts the viewer with ethical questions about their role as spectators and global citizens, using the power of VR to bridge the gap between distant conflict zones and the comfort of the viewer's own reality and understanding of the consequences of war and the existence of conflict.

This piece exemplifies how virtual reality can transform conflict reporting and art into a deeply humanizing experience, reshaping the ways we perceive and respond to crises. It also helps share the cause and true nature of the violence to a wider range of viewers as

well as being a much more impactful way to represent the environment and how it has been impacted to people who are not truly aware.

Virtual reality as an advancement in photographic terms shows us that it is a viable and effective way of being able to represent work like this and in an impactful way. It is an artwork that truly helps immerse viewers into the stark realities of life in a war-torn city.

Thread 11:



The work exists at the intersection of contemporary conflict and the evolving technological landscape, raising critical questions about how we document, understand, and respond to global crises in the digital age.

Does a more technologically advanced system like VR represent a better understanding of conflict and the impacts of war or do regular photos translate the same understanding?

The piece offers a visceral representation of the Syrian Civil War, a conflict marked by unprecedented levels of destruction and global coverage due to media. Unlike traditional

forms of war reporting, which are often mediated through journalists or images on a screen, VR places the viewer within the actual environment.

This direct immersion eliminates some of the barriers that help us fully and emotionally respond to it. The piece forces viewers to grapple with the human toll of war as well as being able to compare it to their own environment and living situations. By doing so, the piece critiques the current value of suffering in modern news cycles, where tragedies often become fleeting headlines.

Thread 12:



In an article by Stuart Dredge for the Guardian we are faced with the discussion of how virtual reality could revolutionize crisis-response filmmaking. I believe that with modern technologies such as virtual reality, we could perceive works differently not on an emotional scale but a physical and scientific one where we can judge the height of buildings and the depth of craters left by bombs with the comparison and realization of accurate scale and mass.

These are things that are now possible to replicate due to technologies. With the use of VR, we could see more abstract and surreal pieces of art being created however I feel that by showing something so raw and unavoidable we are faced with compromise or reflecting on our connection with what the artist is allowing us to see and have demonstrated.

The work also interrogates the ethics of spectatorship in conflict zones which could also translate similarly to people grabbing a seat in a coliseum but on a much larger scale. By situating the viewer as a virtual witness, it challenges the boundaries between observer and participant, asking whether technological engagement can inspire deeper empathy or if it risks reducing trauma to a consumable experience.

VR is also often associated with gaming and entertainment which is a very strong contrast compared to a deeply political and humanitarian message. I think that virtual reality offers artists to be creative even in documentary-based image making and I think it has potential at creating work that allows for both escapism and critical engagement. It also raises questions about accessibility and privilege as mentioned before regarding if more expensive technology means for a better understanding of the context: the same technologies used to create immersive experiences for privileged audiences in safe spaces are out of reach for the individuals whose lives are depicted.

The piece also touches on the role of technology in the spread of misleading information about war and how the use of technology shows for a more legitimate and understandable

depiction. As conflicts are increasingly active online, ranging from social media to VR, the boundary between reality and virtuality blurs and becomes less fine.

The work utilizes VR to represent authenticity and truth, but its reliance on a constructed narrative reminds us that even immersive technologies require some brief context and information along with them too.

Ultimately, the work reflects the complex entanglement of conflict, technology, and ethics in the 21st century. It questions whether technology, while offering multiple opportunities for awareness and empathy, can genuinely effect change in the face of systemic violence and inequality. The collision of these invites critical reflection on how we engage with global suffering in an age where even the most devastating realities can be rendered into virtual version and placed right in front of us.

“Each succeeding war, as cameras became more advanced, the role of photography has evolved to convey the realities of combat and the agonies inflicted, primarily on the soldiers in the field. There is a tragic artistry to the unforgettable pictures of the dead and wounded in twentieth-century wars.”

(Stuart Dredge, 2015, The Guardian, could virtual reality revolutionize crisis-response filmmaking, p5)

This is a quote by Peter Osnos who wrote a report on how photographic technology shapes our understanding of war.

I believe that when he mentions there being artistry in war photography in the twentieth century I think he is referring to something I mentioned earlier regarding how photographers could get photos safely back then it was hazardous and difficult to capture efficient and quality images and to get them developed compared to a digital cameras capability. He does refer to it as being a tragic artistry implying that it must be related to the willingness, lengths and era of war photography being public and viewed politically.

As a conclusion for this essay I believe that after writing more about technology and VR as a method to capture and represent work it is a very effective use of media when paired with the right body and context / theme of work. Because the perception around it is to be used to play games with, it is unusual and intriguing to be used in a completely different

departure where documentary war photography starts to benefit from it. I think technology has changed or almost defined modern-day conflict and the documentation of it as well as shifting the misconceptions and authentic standards / values to be able to represent different reflections of violence.

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