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Documentary Photography and Visual Activism

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How have the visual strategies adopted by 'Photographers of Conflict' changed in response to shifting cultural perspectives?

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Illustrations

Fig. 1

McCullin, D. (1964) *Cyprus* [Black and White Photographic Print]. Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/don-mccullin/don-mccullin-exhibition-guide> (Accessed: 22nd November 2019)

Fig.2

Goya, F. (1820) *The Pilgrimage to San Isidro* [Oil on canvas] Available at: <http://www.franciscogoya.com/the-pilgrimage-to-san-isidro.jsp> (Accessed: 27th November 2019)

Fig.3

Nachtwey, J. (1995) *Chechnya, 1995 – Pallbearers came for a woman's husband, who was killed by the Russian army.* [Black and White Photographic Print] Available at: <http://www.jamesnachtwey.com/> (Accessed: 6th December 2019)

Fig.4

Moore, J. (2007) *Several Killed In Suicide Blast At Bhutto Rally* [Digital Photo] Available at: <https://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/news-photo/survivor-stands-amidst-the-carnage-of-dead-and-wounded-news-photo/78661117?adppopup=true> (Accessed: 6th December 2019)

Fig.5

Ut, J. (1972) *The Terror of War* [Black and White Photographic Print]
Available at: <http://100photos.time.com/photos/nick-ut-terror-war>
(Accessed: 6th December 2019)

Fig.6

Schemidt, R. (2017) *José Víctor Salazar Balza, catching fire during the crisis in Venezuela* [Digital photograph] Available at: <https://www.bjp-online.com/2018/04/qa-ronaldo-schemidt-world-press-photo-of-the-year-nominee/> (Accessed 22nd November 2019)

Fig.7

Parker, H, King, L. (2019) '*Families terrorised by prowler wearing balaclava who peers through their windows*' [Screen shot of webpage] Mirror. Available at: <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/families-terrorised-balaclava-wearing-prowler-20852612> (Accessed: 26th November 2019)

Fig.8

Banksy, (2005) *Rage, Flower Thrower* [Spray Paint] Available at: <http://theconversation.com/banksy-finally-goes-to-court-to-stop-unauthorised-merchandising-despite-saying-copyright-is-for-losers-112390> (Accessed 26th November 2019)

Fig.9

(Cropped and enlarged from original image)

Schemidt, R. (2017) *José Víctor Salazar Balza, catching fire during the crisis in Venezuela* [Digital photograph] Available at: <https://www.bjp-online.com/2018/04/qa-ronaldo-schemidt-world-press-photo-of-the-year-nominee/> (Accessed 22nd November 2019)

Fig.10

Ferran, A. (2001) *The Ground at Ross 9* [Black and white Photograph] Available at: <https://anneferran.com/photographs/lost-to-worlds-2008/> (Accessed 6th December 2019)

Fig.11

Fenton, R. (1855) *Valley of the Shadow of Death* [Black and White Photographic Print] Available at: <http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/60602/roger-fenton-valley-of-the-shadow-of-death-english-april-23-1855/> (Accessed 6th December 2019)

Fig.12

Mosse, R. (2017) *Heat Maps* [Digital Photo] Available at: <http://www.richardmosse.com/projects/heat-maps> (Accessed 10th November 2019)

War Photographer

In his dark room he is finally alone
with spools of suffering set out in ordered rows.
The only light is red and softly glows,
as though this were a church and he
a priest preparing to intone a Mass.
Belfast. Beirut. Phnom Penh. All flesh is grass.

He has a job to do. Solutions slop in trays
beneath his hands, which did not tremble then
though seem to now. Rural England. Home again
to ordinary pain which simple weather can dispel,
to fields which don't explode beneath the feet
of running children in a nightmare heat.

Something is happening. A stranger's features
faintly start to twist before his eyes,
a half-formed ghost. He remembers the cries
of this man's wife, how he sought approval
without words to do what someone must
and how the blood stained into foreign dust.

A hundred agonies in black and white
from which his editor will pick out five or six
for Sunday's supplement. The reader's eyeballs prick
with tears between the bath and pre-lunch beers.
From the aeroplane he stares impassively at where
he earns his living and they do not care.

(Duffy, 2004)

How have the visual strategies adopted by 'Photographers of Conflict' changed in response to shifting cultural perspectives?

This essay will explore how the use of different techniques within the conflict photography medium can influence and shape a blend of responses and viewpoints. Focusing on both contemporary and traditional forms of conflict photography this essay will explore how photographers have focused on different visual approaches to ensure that they continue to engage with their audience, present their subject matter effectively and still cut through an oversaturation of images.

Both traditional forms of photojournalism and photography have shaped the way many history books and newspapers have been written. Visually photographers continue to be the key visual suppliers bringing the intensity of war and conflict to the public. Through differences in medium, technique and point of view, this essay will explore how tools adopted by photographers have presented alternative perspectives. There will be a focus on work presented by different photographers, including Richard Mosse, Don McCullin, Ann Ferran and Ronaldo Schemidt.



Figure 1

Historically conflict imagery has often become an iconic visual representation of war, for example in Figure 1, taken in 1964 Don McCullin on his first international assignment produced: '*Cyprus*' which portrayed the devastation of the civil war between Turkey and Greece. The image itself was created using black and white film and depicts four subjects in the foreground in acute distress. McCullin captured this image in the moment that the villagers received the news that their husbands/fathers/brothers and sons had died trying to defend their village. The subject central to the image became the iconic face for the civil war at the time. The power of creating an iconic image is further explored in *Picturing Atrocity* where the idea of iconic '... is not a given but created,

culturally produced' (Pollock, 2012). In light of this it is interesting to consider how an image can be culturally produced and essentially how it is adopted by its audience will in turn have the power to change a photograph into an iconic representation of decades of conflict. As a collective the audience reflected upon this image, recognised its power and gave it key historical significance.

McCullin also references the importance of facial expressions on the women's faces in his documentary film: '*McCullin*' where he discusses what he noticed: '... you saw these Goyaesque poses of people looking up to God. I've noticed this a lot in wars, when people are in deep grief they look up as if they can see God himself there offering them some help.' ('McCullin' 2013) McCullin suggests his subjects' faces resemble Francisco Goya paintings that depict deep distress and sorrow.



Figure 2

The very comparison of Goya's subjects to his own suggests a sense of romanticism and the finishing quality of a painting, yet, it is also the idea of touch that creates another layer of visual anchorage for the significance of the image. Structurally touch and comfort proves prominent., with all subjects in McCullin's image surrounding the widow, gripping onto her to comfort her and share a collective sense of grief.

In terms of professional credibility, the image won third place in the General News Stories category of the World Press Photo competition in 1964, an accolade which showcases the image as both a photographic and historical statement and to provide visual clarity of this particular civil war.

Fundamentally the image is an example of a classic photojournalism style ideal for reproduction in newspapers, magazines and journals. This style has proven prominent and has been adopted by many photojournalists throughout many decades of historical conflicts. The images in Figures 3--5 showcase other examples of this style of photography to depict conflict and universal suffering:



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

A more modern juxtaposition now which won Photo of the Year at World Press Photo, 2018 is '*José Víctor Salazar Balza, catching fire during the crisis in Venezuela*', by Ronaldo Schemidt. This more contemporary example was taken during 2017 in Venezuela, Schmidt 's birthplace and home.



Figure 6

Within this powerful image, Balza is seen running while engulfed in flames. This event was one of many that took place in Venezuela between anti-government protesters and Venezuela armed forces, who had been ordered by President Nicolas Maduro to maintain order. The image, being in colour, portrays the intensity of the fire, contrasted against the colours of his body

and the brick background. The body language and movement within the image brings to light the pain and fear the subject would have been experiencing. Although the subject's face is covered by a black gas mask, it could be interpreted as portraying a remarkable sense of heroism and activism. As the subject's facial expression is hidden, we see only his urgent flight response to find safety in his battle between man versus fire. This symbol of a man in a balaclava or mask can be seen in many different formats and often raises negative connotations, both in the media and the art world.

Families terrorised by prowler wearing balaclava who peers through their windows

Figure 7

This headline was taken from a news report by the Mirror in November 2019. Headlines such as this example use the symbol of a balaclava or mask as a subject related to crime or terror. When the subject in question is unknown or wants to retain his anonymity the item of clothing becomes part of the person's identity. Interestingly artists such as Banksy in the piece '*Rage, Flower Thrower*' used the stereotype of a masked man to portray a powerful opposite message. Banksy juxtaposes the idea/ symbol of the 'rebellion man' to have more meaning towards peace and resolution of conflict. Located on the side of a garage wall in Jerusalem this piece shows a weapon replaced with a bunch of flowers, the only part of the piece in colour.



Figure 8

Interestingly Schemidt's image features a small spray-painted gun on the wall opposite the subject with the word 'Paz', which means peace in English, and therefore draws parallels with Banksy's *'Rage, Flower Thrower'*.



Figure 9

When comparing the subjects within McCullin's and Schemidt's images they both show (significance in terms of subject matter. It's clear that McCullin's and Schemidt's pieces capture 'real time' events showcasing the victims of conflict in the moment and these images would have been released to the world almost instantaneously.

In Picturing *Atrocity*, the idea of images that have to be seen is explored: 'Photography's essence comes from its capacity to manifest, to expose, the that-has-to-be-seen' (Pollock, 2012). Schemidt's piece portrays this seamlessly for his own personal motive of highlighting the conflict in his birthplace and to expose the country's political unrest to the world. Schemidt's personal connection to Venezuela, produces a separate quality and intensity to the image creating a different kind of intimacy that photographers working in this way can utilise to develop depth and connection to their storytelling.

Within Schemidt's World Press Photo video '*World Press Photo Contest 2018: Ronaldo Schemidt on his winning World Press Photo of the Year*', he elaborates on how the work 'affects [him] more because [his] friends and family still live there' (World Press Photo Foundation, 2018). This is an example of a photographer taking a more personalised approach to his subject matter. Although like McCullin's piece, the photograph is taken at the point of tragedy, Schemidt is still able to present this conflict from an alternative angle.

Although this classic photojournalistic style has developed as a baseline for many photographers capturing conflicts, it raises questions about the ethics of capturing conflict. Within *The Cruel Radiance* By Susie Linfield (2010) , Human rights is a topic that is discussed in great detail and further to this the idea that absence is the key to philosophies surrounding human rights.

When someone is deprived of basic human rights it forms as an absence. Linfield believes that '... photographers, [she] would argue, are the perfect medium to mirror the lacunae at the heart of human rights ideals' (Linfield, 2010 p. 37). She recognises that photographers are the key to capturing and highlighting these happenings in order to highlight the voids created when there is a lack of human rights. Cultural perspectives in relation to human rights are important for photographers to help them identify how to approach conflict situations and the image they want to create. Human rights and how these are perceived culturally continue to challenge photographers and artists looking to continue to create the links between conflict and human rights with the aim of creating responses from the audience.

The more abstract work of Ann Ferran is an example of conflict and human rights that has somehow lost its place in history, an image that strives to remind the audience of past tragedy and events:



Figure 10

Ferran's work showcases a more utopia style of working. The image '*The Ground at Ross 9*' is part of a series titled '*Lost to Worlds*' (Ferran, 2001) and establishes a new approach to photographing places of conflict. The image itself is taken of a patch of grass at Ferran's feet. Small details like dips in the ground, pebbles and a ray of light are subtle differences which distinguish this photograph from the rest of her series. There was

very limited context released alongside Ferran's work, an absence of information, which sometimes can leave a viewer feeling more deprived or alternatively create a spark of interest in a piece to ensure the history is not forgotten by a new generation. The viewer is aware of the location of the photograph from its title and history shows that the image is taken in Tasmania where multiple female houses of correction and prisons were situated. The conditions were inhumane and meant that many, including many children, did not survive and the land is filled with the unmarked graves of babies and children.

Susie Linfield, author of *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence*, (Linfield, 2010) when talking about Ferran's image references that: "...women and their children have become largely invisible to history" (Linfield, 2010) Without this contextual information alongside the work it forces the audience to approach this subject in a different way. Linfield sums up the distinctiveness of the project by further elaborating: 'what is distinctive, and even provocative about this kind of art is that it seeks to bear witness to particular historical traumas while refusing to show them to us' (Linfield, 2010). By not repeating or presenting the viewer with monstrous scenes it enables the viewer to take on a narrative of their own and distinguish themselves the history of the ground they see before them. Essentially the audience has to work harder to understand the historical context and Ferran visually references the horror as if it has seeped into the soil of its location.

Although this idea of location has been utilised by many photographers, one much earlier example was taken in 1855 by Roger Fenton, entitled '*Valley of the Shadow of Death*' Figure 9. It is Ferran however who appears to create intrigue and a discrepancy between location and presentation in its rawest of forms. In terms of Fenton's landscape image, it has been suggested that the round shots and shells may have been manipulated before photographing. The manipulation of the scene and the religious overtones of its title could potentially lead the audience as opposed to Ferran's approach of encouraging the audience to find out more for themselves.



Figure 11

When analysing current strategies in the more contemporary division of conflict photography, the work of Richard Mosse in *'Heat Maps'* (Mosse, 2017) showcases a new creative approach. Mosse's series of images include multiple landscape shots of refugee camps and sites of shelters for migrants. The camera chosen for the project was a military grade thermal imaging camera and its original use was to map out territories of enemy camps, or operations, as well as recording the impact of missile and bombing attacks. The images also feature alien-like colouring on a grey scale that washes out any form of natural colour.

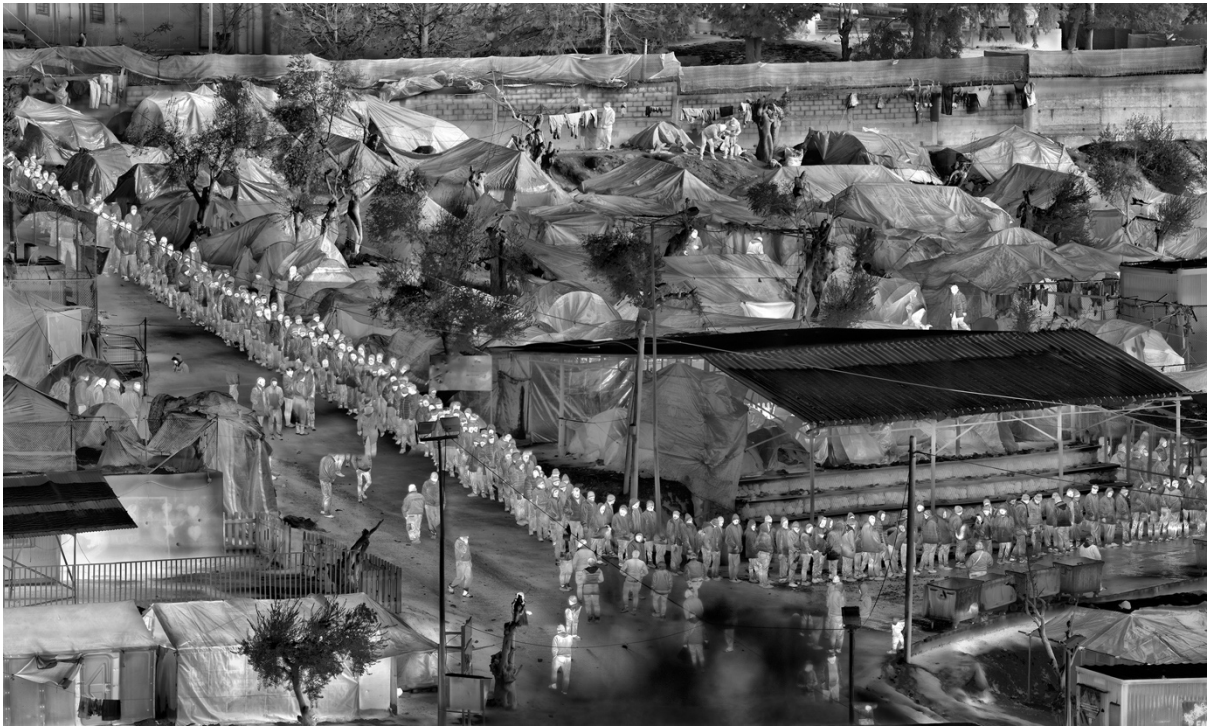


Figure 12

The interesting use of descriptive words used by Mosse such as 'security gates' and 'perimeter fences' within the project description, highlight the security of the space and create parallels between refugee camps and prisons; essentially facilities designed to keep people contained from the rest of the world. Mosses video analysis *Artist Statement* (2017) also includes heavy comparisons between the: 'isolated disembodied traces of human...' where humans are treated the same as animals. This project forces the viewer into seeing this crisis through a different medium and Mosse further controls the viewing space through releasing his work through exhibitions and through his website.

Mosse uses the idea of heat as a structure of redefining how we see migrants and these scenes making a stronger more thought-provoking political statement. He understands the views of society and uses this style of working '... to more adequately tell the stories of refugees.' (Mosse, 2017)

The basis of using a military grade heat sensing camera against itself embodies his change of perspective. Within his *Artist Statement* he discusses the use of this technology and how it incorporates a number of themes including: 'Ambivalence, subjectivity, perception, body heat, mortality, borders, surgency, climate change and war' (Mosse, 2017). The camera originally the weapon used for the purpose of war is now being used to expose the refugee crisis as a product of that war. Mosse shifts the power balance of the camera to now capture the intensely complex and sensitive scenes of struggling refugees.

In conclusion, the continuation of war and conflict poses a question of the sustainability of photographing intense conflict scenes, especially as society becomes more desensitised to images of trauma. This is a dilemma that photographers continue to explore through new and innovative ideas, state of the art equipment and techniques to ensure their images continue to create meaning and impact. However, this still has its limitations as mainstream media continues to reproduce images in the more traditional photojournalistic style that portrays conflict through 'real time' human

suffering. This sense of media control could impact on the creativity of the photographer and what is and isn't seen by the public. Therefore, although new and unique visual strategies are being adopted by 'Photographers of Conflict' in response to shifting cultural perspectives, fundamentally these approaches are not clearly visible through mainstream media.

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