Image of Violence - Notes

Concerned

Humanistic Photography has been under pressure from within and from without; in the real world, and the world of critical discourse.

Photography limited by what it can reveal. An imperfect form, unable to contextualize complex geopolitical situations.

Don McCullin inveighs against the injustices of the world and admits himself that his pictures achieved very little. A claim that could be made if we ignore the incremental potency that reporting with such directness on the world achieves.

The Marxist Argument:

John Berger suggests that McCullin's photographs shock and in so doing, numb the viewer – depoliticizes them. This prevents the call to arms that the events depicted deserve

(classic response of an unreconstructed Marxist)

Compassion Fatigue:

Sontag: "The shock of photographed atrocities wears off with repeated viewings…In these last decades, 'concerned' photography has done at least as much to deaden conscience as arouse it."

High emotion, low analysis.

I am going to be talking about documentary photography – to use a broad term – more specifically I will be using conflict or war photography as my example to illustrate changes that have affected documentary practice and transitions that are ongoing.

The fascination photographers have with this topic, is further exemplified by the number of students who write their dissertations on the subject – sometimes very specifically, sometimes because an essay about representation often needs to examine documentary photography in extremis.

War or Conflict Photography is the totem of Photojournalism

As we go through these slides, I would like you to consider some of the following concepts:

The location of documentary practice from before the term was used, when any photograph was effectively a document.

Reaching a point where documentary and photography as an artistic medium partially separated toward the end of the 19th century.

Documentary photography's associations with the various institutions and media that support it. The illustrated magazine Life etc.

New Documents. The transgressive world of the independent photographer – windows, mirrors and what Fred Ritchin describes as mosaics.

The subjective documentary photographer cometh.

The decline of magazine photojournalism – when did it happen; has it happened?

Citizen Journalism – the mobile phone

20% of submissions to World Press Photo are disqualified for failing to meet the 'no digital adjustment' criteria.

David Hockney says the digital is the end of photography because we cannot trust photographs (even though we never could).

The critique: postmodernism, post colonialism, the indignity of speaking for others. Susan Sontag, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, Martha Rosler, Susan Sontag, John Tagg – a challenge to humanism, concern, stereotypical modes of representation.

The feeling that this kind of photography either claimed a kind of truth or had this claim thrust upon it. Doubtful of any claims to objectivity or evidential purpose – excoriating any reckoning of the form as evidence or objective truth.

The practice as a grand narrative, further distrusted as a mechanism of capitalism, subordinated to the status quo.

The ‘Regime of the Image’ Abigail Solomon-Godeau

(An assumed rhetoric; an ideology or discourse that the medium itself barely recognizes as part of its structure. An internal contradiction.)

The argument that photojournalism can be prone to:

Redundant, repeated tropes.

Sentimentality and Mimesis.

Seen this way by John Tagg in reference to Michel Foucault and the influence of the neo-Marxism of Louis Althusser. Because of its connection with the media world, and even the art world, which could still be considered an ideological state actor, images thus distributed cannot be trusted, or at least must undergo a critical appraisal so as not to enforce supplication on the audience. Images lose any claim to subvert an accepted view and are therefore an adjunct of the war apparatus.

The tensions within conflict photography:

Photojournalists doubting either the effectiveness/efficacy of what they are doing.

The critical challenge to either assumed or stated truth values, or ethical/political positions not being met.

The growing complexity of geopolitical events and the way technology challenges historical and existing visual paradigms.

Abu Ghraib

The power of the Abu Ghraib pictures is that they shock not because of what they depict, rather their careless, artless, ill-defined snap-shot aesthetic, the banal smiles on the faces of perpetrators casually torturing prisoners; the easy offering up of these images as if shared images of a new-born baby, shown as if they didn't matter challenges and consumes 'professional' images of the Middle Eastern conflict.

The reduction ad absurdum around the Photo-op military event, prevalent in the 1991 Gulf War, in the early years of 24-hour rolling news. Feeding frenzy of crumbs from the table.

A ubiquitous form of photography, prone to visual cliché, attracted to easy targets that re-affirm a western hegemony.

From within: The agreement that many industry figures and photographers have had about their role, especially in light of its seeming futility as an instrument of change.

The magazine Market - The loss of revenue to finance meaningful, long-term assignments: photographers have to resource themselves.

The gallery, the book, the blog, social media, the internet. In *After Photography*, Ritchin's Mosaic replaces the mirror and the window. A discursive practice – difficult to pin down. Szarkowski in the 1960's ventured that the documentary image had evolved from Window (on the world) to mirror – a reflection of the photographer as much or more than the subje

Neil Burgess calls it!

The War on Terror and the emergence if imbedding (and its discontents)

Imbedding as a more benign censorship. Modern warfare was beginning to exclude immediate visualization. Often the option was, as with Simon Norfolk, to avoid it; with Broomberg and Charnerin to embrace and then subvert it.

The soft censorship argument is interesting. Many photographers were surprised at how free they were to take and wire pictures with little in the way of censorship. The censorship was the limitation of access to the people either on whom, or in who's name, the war was being inflicted. Secondly, that the embedding process created a connection with the soldiers intended to engender empathy and understanding, breaking the critical distance that traditionally has been seen as desirable by journalists.

Aesthetics of conflict. An area of critique whether professional clarity or the rhetoric of immediacy and action in Capa's D-Day, Pellegrin's grain, Hetherington's blur. The sublime, large-scale aesthetic of Simon Norfolk; the surreal and dream-like Richard Mosse; the contingent, ghostly Trevor Paglen.

Trevor Paglen – Military bases, Hidden, Black Sites and Satellites.

Choke Points of networked information.

Surveillance and the Shadow State

The Artist as Activist

"The technological nature of today's warfare has resulted in a war that is clearly impossible to document as it happens."

Sarah James, Memories of Fire (Ed. Julian Stallabrass)

Umberto Eco's quote is troubling, suggesting as it does a drift that removes an image from its contextual moorings. The event fades, along with the suffering of its actuality, to leave a ghostly icon in its stead.

Simon Norfolk International 'Military Sublime'

Dehumanization

Critics back photojournalism (even Susan Sontag)

Is there something to photograph?

THE DAY NOBODY DIED

In June 2008 Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin travelled to Afghanistan to be embedded with British Army units on the front line in Helmand Province. Along with their cameras, they took a roll of photographic paper, contained in a simple lightproof cardboard box.

They arrived during the deadliest month of the war. On the first day of their visit a BBC fixer was dragged from his car and executed and nine Afghan soldiers were killed in a suicide attack. The following day, three British soldiers died, pushing the number of British combat fatalities to 100.

Casualties continued until the fifth day when nobody died. In response to each of these events, and also to a series of more mundane moments, such as a visit to the troops by the Duke of York and a press conference, all events a photographer would record, Broomberg & Chanarin instead unrolled a six-meter section of the paper and exposed it to the sun for 20 seconds. The results seen here deny the viewer the cathartic effect offered up by the conventional language of photographic responses to conflict and suffering.

Working in tandem with this deliberate evacuation of content, are the circumstances of the works' production, which amount to an absurd performance in which the British Army, unsuspectingly, played the lead role. Co-opted by the artists into transporting the box of photographic paper from London to Helmand, these soldiers helped in transporting the box from one military base to another, on Hercules and Chinooks, on buses, tanks and jeeps. In this performance, presented as a film, the box becomes an absurd, subversive object, its non-functionality sitting in quietly amused contrast to the functionality of the system that for a time served as its host. Like a barium test, the journey of the box became, when viewed from the right perspective, an analytical process, revealing the dynamics of the machine in its quotidian details, from the logistics of war to the collusion between the media and the military. The Day Nobody Died comprises of a series of radically non-figurative, unique, action-photographs, offering a profound critique of conflict photography in the age of embedded journalism and the current crisis in the concept of the engaged, professional witness.

Broomberg and Chanarin's website

Richard Mosse

Infra/Enclave

But, even as he was welcomed in by Magnum, Mosse privately harboured an increasing sense of disillusionment with documentary photography. He had become frustrated with what he saw as its repetitiveness and its conservatism, the way it makes claims to the truth and to eternal relevance, yet is as authored and considered as any other medium. BJP on Richard Mosse – Tom Seymour

The Enclave

Aerochrome – Use of military technology to record factions in The Democratic Republic of Congo

"So we captured some extremely authentic gestures – people asleep, people embracing each other, people at prayer. There's a stolen intimacy to it. There's no awareness, there's no self-consciousness. It's a two-step process – dehumanising them and then making them human again." - *Incoming*

In Mosse's work, military technology is turned on itself, and because of this is disquieting. A mechanism of terror, just as Aerochrom Infra-red film was an earlier military technology (used to spot camourflaged sites), the heat-sensing camera of Incoming both because of its actual purpose – and one might say it is just technology and its use governs its status – but also because it seems to align itself with all the criticisms that Sontag poured over the head of photojournalism to begin with: dehumanization (but without Mosse's stated resolution), voyeurism, abstraction etc.

As the audience is made of gallery visitors, rather than the tens or hundreds of thousands that might experience the work in a magazine, the debate is open. As we watch the sequence of large scale moving and still images, we are struck by a connection with the notion of the contemporary sublime – scale and technology – and an oneiric or eerily dreamlike state, a confusion of sound and visuals over 3 screens. The connection with unreality, hyper-reality, simulation and simulacrum is as apparent as it was during the first Gulf War.

Richard Mosse's powerful video installation The Enclave (2013) premiered at the 2013 Venice Biennale in the Irish Pavilion. The Enclave was produced using a recently discontinued military film technology originally designed in World War II to reveal camouflaged installations hidden in the landscape. This film registers an invisible spectrum of infrared light, rendering the green landscape in vivid hues of lavender, crimson, and hot pink. On the threshold of the medium's extinction, Mosse employed this film to document an ongoing conflict situation in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. This humanitarian disaster—in which 5.4 million people have died since 1998—is largely overlooked by the mass media. Frequent massacres, human rights violations, and widespread sexual violence remain unaccounted for. In a kind of advocacy of seeing, The Enclave attempts to cast this forgotten tragedy in a new spectrum of light, to make this forgotten humanitarian disaster visible.

Incoming

In *Incoming*, Mosse's 'camera' is classified as an advanced weapons system and controlled under the International Traffic in Arms Regulations. He first came across it through a friend working on the BBC's *Planet Earth* television series. Using thermographic technology, the device can 'see' more than 50km, registering a heat signature as a relative temperature difference.
Patented by the US military, it is normally used in battlefield surveillance, reconnaissance and ballistics targeting, but Mosse has used the weapon against its intended purpose. He has taken something designed to help hunt and kill an enemy
and manipulating it to capture and comment on the most pressing subject of our times – the great migration of so many people.

"Using a part of a weapon to figure the refugee crisis is a deeply ambivalent and political task," Mosse says. "And building a new language around that weapon – one of compassion and disorientation, one that allows the viewer to see these events

through an unfamiliar and alienating technology – is a deeply political gesture."

Reading heat signatures of people who are completely unaware they're being caught on camera, Mosse shows us bodies only recognisable through an intense white glow. And so we only recognise them through the context of their landscape – the great stretches of land and sea that surround them, the tent cities, the teeming boats.

Unlike the migrants that have populated our newsfeeds for the past two years, they're shorn of facial expressions or cultural demarcations – gender, race, age or sex. "The camera I've used dehumanises people," Mosse says. "Their skin glows so they look alien, or monstrous and zombie-like.

"You can see their blood circulation, their sweat, their breath. You can't see the pupils of their eyes, but a black jelly instead. But, in fact, it allows you to capture portraiture of extraordinary tenderness. We often shot at night, from miles and miles away, so we were shooting people who were not aware of being filmed.

"So we captured some extremely authentic gestures – people asleep, people embracing each other, people at prayer. There's a stolen intimacy to it. There's no awareness, there's no self-consciousness. It's a two-step process – dehumanising them and then making them human again."

Jeff Wall – Dead Troops Talk

In this multi-character tableau, Wall presents a highly orchestrated fantasy that mixes black humour with pathos.

Dead Troops Talk (a vision after an ambush of a Red Army patrol, near Moqor, Afghanistan, winter 1986) 1992

In Dead Troops Talk, Wall merges conventions from war and horror movies with those of the history painting of previous eras to create an elaborate, grotesque fiction. The picture presents a hallucinatory scene in which soldiers who have just been killed on the battlefield are re-animated, engaging with each other in what the artist describes as a 'dialogue of the dead'. As the title indicates, the troops are a Soviet patrol ambushed in Afghanistan during the war and occupation of the 1980s. Each figure or group seems to respond differently to the experience of death and reanimation. The three soldiers clowning with their own wounds provide a note of macabre levity. Wall has suggested that their black humour is as plausible a reaction to their circumstances as the more serious or distressed responses of their comrades. As carefully constructed as a film or epic painting, the work was shot in a large temporary studio, involving performers and costume, special effects and make-up professionals. The figures were photographed separately or in small groups and the final image was assembled as a digital montage.

Alfredo Jaar, *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita* (Rwanda, 1994)

David Levi Strauss – 102-104 from Paul Virilio's quote

Compare to Jean Baudrillard's essays about the first gulf war: *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (1991)

An atrocity of massively asymmetrical combat, that was presented as a war by the US military using new technologies that reduced the reality of war to what looked like a video game; a simulacrum of war.