

Contextual studies – Research in Context

Lecturer – Paul Duerinckx

ADAD5003

Through the concept of lens-based image explore the idea on whether images in conflict can act as testimonies or distort the reality they intend to capture?

Word count - 2,309

The concept of the lens-based image is the foundation that many photographers follow when producing images however, some may argue in relation the practice of war photography when captured the images act as a testimony to the conflict or the actions portrayed by each side. For example, James Nachtwey considers himself a “A witness and his images are his “testimony” however, I’d argue there a misconception because often a photographer dictates what we as the viewers narrowing our insight and only through disburse in history often the full contexts of imagery are understood. As stated by Susan Sontag "the hunt for more dramatic ... images drives the photographic enterprise” (*Regarding the pain of others*, 2003) the concept presented by Susan Sontag is the alternatives argument to whether a photograph can act as a testimony and drives forward the idea I seek to argue in my essay that the very existence of the concept of the Lens Based image, Denys credibility to the idea that a photograph can act as a testimony, rather it follows the strict standards that are expected in photography and only through the discourse of the imagery that the history then provides context and allows the image to act as a form of evidence that can attest to the cruelty of war.



Figure 1

The conflict in Afghanistan in the late 1900s and early 2000s inspired a wave of photojournalism, Nachtwey being a notable journalist from this period, figure 1 is from the Afghanistan conflict, 1996 is when this image was captured, it was a time of political transformation for Afghanistan as the Taliban began imposing their strict Islamic Law on the inhabitants alienating women in particular during period. There is a sense of normalisation in *figure 1* as it follows the standard of conflict photography throughout this period and in modern photography, as seen often civilians were depicted mourning capturing the after effect of war and the idea what is left behind, although this image incapsulates the idea of the ‘*dramatic*’ that Sontag references heavily and not attesting to the idea of the pain being felt by the individual rather capturing the image for the economic gain. This also explores how Nachtwey is trying to distort the perception of this image through the Lense and framing of the image to dictate the discussion by being a comment on the atrocities committed in Afghanistan during this period and what is left after war. Nachtwey also dictates a sense of empathy for the civilian through the lens and context he creates as she morns although the discourse of an image like this in the modern day would be evaluated differently by critics, as after 911 peoples view on the middle east was distorted by stereotypes. The theory of realism in photography is one that attests to the ideas of testimonies that Nachtwey referenced in his own quote, his work is provocative due to the reality of his images as “*The lens of the camera saw the world in an objective way, with an undercurrent of narrative that was both provocative and effective*”(Daniel Gomen *The creative spirit* 1929) as Nachtweys work relates to both of these ideas as exhibited in *figure 1* this relates to the realities of the death and destruction caused not only by the Taliban but by the western powers themselves, this proves as a

testimony as it's everlasting in the discussion in the realities in conflicts his image does not rely on the atheistic rather, it relies on reality itself. Despite this Nachtweys heavy reliance on the discourse of his imagery and the idea that his images will evoke a discourse of the conflicts he captures, it can be argued that his image from *Figure 1* is a perfect example of Sontag's argument as *“morally alert photographers and ideologues of photography have become increasingly concerned with the issues of exploitation of sentiment (pity, compassion, indignation) in war photography and of rote ways of provoking feeling.”* Nachtwey follows this concept heavily and although it can be argued that he attempts to demonstrate the terrors committed by the Taliban and his image simply to acts as a testimony to the conflict he witnessed, the persistence in his imagery as a documentary photographer to follow this concept of the ‘victim’ follows Sontag's theory that his imagery rotes away any feeling rather just attempts to act as a emotive device for those who view it, to inspire pity than to evoke change through his testimony.



Figure 2

While considering Nachtwey's photography, you must also study conflict retrospectively, to attest to the idea of images being a testimony in conflict and to see Nachtwey's ideas of testimonies through a different ‘lens’. Figure 2 is an image by Don Mccullin of Berlin in 1961, this is based 16 years after the surrender of Germany and during a period of growing tensions between the

Soviet Union and America due to the construction of the Berlin wall separating east and west Germany. This image arguably has been purposefully constructed and framed to at first glance present the civilian present in the image as all powerful, but the machine gun present in the image shifts the dynamic of power to the soldier allowing the presence of the gun to control the image and dictate the narrative towards violence. The context surrounding this image can only be studied retrospectively as the tensions heightened between the ideologies of America and the Soviet Union Germany was simply a victim during this period of instability, Mccullin's work can only be viewed through history and his framing contextualises the soldiers as invaders rather than protectors as the reality for West Germanys citizens were far better than East, which perpetuates the idea that a photograph is not a testimony rather than the reality that a photographer seeks to dictate based on the context at the present moment. The idea of conventionalism weaves into Mccullin's work for this time due to the nature of how he presents the American soldiers it could be viewed as propaganda as explored in this quote, "Regarded the photograph as a mechanical copy of an external scene requiring minimal human interference", this concept is followed heavily by Mccullin as he hasn't asked the soldiers or civilians to be present rather he is simply capturing reality, however despite his minimal intervention in the frame he chose how we depict this image he dictates a sense of empathy for the civilians while also drawing on the aesthetics of guns themselves as a marvel of invention but as state by John Berger "*photographer's way of seeing is reflected in his choice of subject*" (John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* 1972) . Simply he followed the norms during of photography, throughout this period so rather than his images act as a testimony to the realities of Germany during the cold war, he created an aesthetically pleasing shot through distorting his image through the Lense.



Figure 3

While considering conflict photography and the idea of reality being distorted, Nick Uts 'Napalm girl' in *figure 3* must be considered. This photo is notable through history, through the discourse it has caused around conflict photography. Now it is clear that although often lens-based image making creates a biased image as it narrows our view, Ut is trying to perpetuate the suffering of the children within the image but also use this image to act as a symbol for the suffering around Vietnam at this time, one of the children being known as Phan Thi Kim Phuc. The soldiers within the image are shown to be calm and composed surrounded by the suffering caused by America however, through understanding history scenes such as this had become the norm in the Vietnam conflict as stated by Nick Ut "*We were being shot at every day*" the risk and dangers were felt by both sides of this conflict as were the horrors inflicted, This image in fact does act as a testimony to those horrors although seemingly biased. In the modern the issue with this image has been formed around the nudity displayed within the image rather than the context of the image itself which calls the ethics of journalism in to place and questioned what is 'appropriate' and the horrors of war displayed, as Nick Ut won an award titled '*terrors of war*' due to this image. As explored in a paper called 'ethics of care' the notability of this image was created due to the bias created within the journalism community of this being newsworthy due to its ability to spark conversation and human interest often during this period this is simply all it required for a photo to spark notability throughout the community and International press. Nick Uts Napalm girl is a clear example that an image can in fact act as a testimony that attests to the suffering of war, it does not distort reality, rather in the Napalm girls case it acts as a footnote in history for the suffering incited by the Vietnam conflict, although not intended Nick Ut inspired a conversation of ethics within journalism his imagery created a discourse that has lasted to the modern day of what is ethical to capture when photographing conflict and to do this he did not distort reality rather the imagery he created sparked a 50 year conversation. There is also an interesting concept investigated by Fred S fyles, he explores the idea of what makes a conflict photographer different from a normal photographer Simply he explains the only difference being is conflict photography demonstrates how "*Fragility of humanity*". The concepts he explores in his article are that simply documentary photography have no biases they are not controlled by political systems or do they have motives rather they are there to capture to reality but a concept such as this calls into question the idea of the context that is lost behind the lens rather, only through discourse do we often discovers the true horrors behind conflict imagery.



Figure 4

When considering conflict photography, historically Hiroshima is the most pivotal change in conflict in history, it changed how wars were fought. *Figure 4* is an image captured following the nuclear bomb being detonated and the aftermath that followed, the image was captured by Ken Domon in 1958, he was a notorious photographer and created the book called “*ken domon Hiroshima*” which was a series of photographs that he captured throughout Japan following the attack by America. Domons image in figure 4 is clear example of how necessary it is not only to capture the conflict as it happens, but also the aftermath, Hiroshima changed how the world viewed conflict it created a tension between the powers of the world and shifted the power to America and sparked the cold war and the arms race with the soviet union of the time. This image demonstrates once again children playing in a lake which due to the destroyed building opposite, seemingly has been impacted by the radiation emitted from the bomb detonated in Hiroshima using children as a way of showing the terrors of war is a common device throughout the images used in this essay, due to the innocence they often possess but not only this but it also sparks conversation through media channels whereas adults often do not. Despite this imagery being true to history it can be argued that it has been tainted by the biased of press once again due to the benefits gained from following this framework created by the media, they distort reality in order to gain a better narrative as seen in the image above using children playing as a emotive device so it cannot be used as fact or testimony for the realities of the aftermath of Hiroshima in *Figure 4* “*The press is notoriously fictive in its*

storytelling.” Even the most factual reports have been couched in language and imagery” (Caroline Brothers War Photography Evidence). As explored throughout Caroline Brothers book , the idea of documentary photography often only conserves itself to the knowledge that the public already known, rather it is a “*trophy hunting*” which is clear in Figure 4 although it could be argued that Domon was simply trying to demonstrate the everlasting effect the Hiroshima left in Japan it is clear through the imagery used to display this concept that he tried to distort reality rather appeal to the emotions of the viewers viewing rather than it being a testimony of the realities of Japan after the bombing of Hiroshima.

Throughout this essay although often documentary photographers intend for the imagery that they create to be a testimony of the realities of conflict often through the concept of lens based image making they distort reality in order to appeal to the masses and capture a reaction of discourse through the imagery they create rather than being a testimony to the realities of war throughout the world. In the case of Figure 3 this is the epitomes of what Conflict photography is supposed to be capturing the suffering as it happens create a sense of discomfort as we view the imagery as it showed as a society, we had an ever-increasing discourse of the nudity in the image rather than the suffering that was impacting innocent children. In the case of Nachtwey is concept of the his images being his ‘testimony’ was a concept and theme that I sought to discuss in the essay through all imagery displayed, it was clear that although that each of these photographers simply intended to capture the realities that they saw, however due to the way each of them intended their frames to create a sense of empathy to a side in the conflict it can be argued in how this can be a testimony, as testimonies are meant to be the truth of the realities and no lost context through the frame they created. Although documentary photography in conflict intends to be a testimony to what happened, through the devices uses by the photographers themselves to appeal to the media or person realities in conflict imagery are distorted.

Figures

Figure 1 – Afganistan 1996- Moruning a brother killed by a Taliban rocket – James Nachtway

Figure 2 – Don Mccullin Berlin 1961

Figure 3 - Nick Ut's 'Napalm girl' 1972

Figure 4 – Ken domon Hiroshima 1958

Bibliography

Berger, J. (2012) *Ways of seeing: Based on the BBC television series with John Berger*. London: British Broadcasting Corp.

Borge , M. (2019) *documentary photography reconsidered*. 1st edn.

Brothers , C. (1997) *War and photography: a cultural history*.

Conflict - time - photography: Exhibition guide (2014). London: Tate Britain.

Creveld , M.V. (1989) *Technology and war from 2000Bc to present*.

Fyles, F.S. (no date) *The Ethics of War Photography, Felix*. Available at: <https://old.felixonline.co.uk/articles/2014-11-14-the-ethics-of-war-photography/> (Accessed: 03 December 2023).

Honnef, K. *et al.* (1997) *German photography, 1870-1970: Power of a medium*. Köln: DuMont.

Ray , L. (no date) *Social theory, photography and the visual aesthetic of cultural ...*
Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1749975520910589>
(Accessed: 01 December 2023).

Sontag , S. (2003) *Pain of others* . 1st Editon: Penguin.

Viner , K. (2017) *In Turbulent Times, we need good journalism more than ever*, *The Guardian*. Available at:
<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2017/nov/16/katharine-viner-we-need-public-interest-journalism-in-turbulent-digital-age> (Accessed: 01 December 2023).