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Using at least 3 examples, consider how image makers have utilised digital technology to explore violence and conflict

How are the images of violence that we see in the media altered and mediated to push a particular story or narrative? In a world overly saturated with images produced not for the sake of documenting a moment but with the intention of making the consumer feel a certain way- how can we tell how truthful the intention of the images we are viewing is? 'By the end of the decade, the Internet will change how we look at everything, including how we see the world' (Mirzoeff, 2015, p. 17) this can be seen through the constant emergence of new and innovative technology which makes space for image makers to utilise it to produce work that comments on and explores conflict in ways that continuously evolve. There are many ideas that conflict photography explores such as shock value, compassion fatigue, ethics, and the idea of the 'other' (Hall, 2006) which I will be discussing further in this essay. There is discussion to be had around the purpose of these images that brings forward the question- where is the ethical line as to what we feel is ok to photograph and what takes them past this point? Moreover, is this line being blurred more and more as we continue to become saturated with images of violence in the daily News, TV dramas, movies and video games we consume. Therefore is our sensitivity to these kinds of images becoming less, leading to photographers hunting for the seemingly lucrative images that would force people into feeling something.

‘In this digital age, critics question the relevance and veracity of the documentary image because it is so easy to seamlessly manipulate an image and because of the seemingly blurry moral line of editors and photographers.’ (Bogre, 2011)



Fig 1.

The image of billowing smoke in Beirut is one of many that have been altered digitally in a way that manipulates it to fit a narrative better. It is often referred to on the internet as the first example of ‘fauxtography’, meaning an image that has been altered in some way, although there is no definitive source to attribute this phrase to. Some may argue that as it is only a small alteration, changing the smoke to make it look like the bombing happened on a much larger scale, then it is harmless. However, this small action comments on how we perceive conflict images and leads the way for much larger and more sinister changes. The idea that the original image was not shocking enough brings us back to the idea that we have

become desensitised to these kinds of images and therefore the only way Adana Hajj thinks the work will make an impact is by exaggerating the terrible event. 'We assemble a world from pieces, assuming that what we see is both coherent and equivalent to reality. Until we discover it is not' (Mirzoeff, 2015, p. 10) The idea that digitally altering this image brought more light to the situation is likely incorrect, in fact through the process of this image being discredited it is more likely people grew tired of the story as they felt they had a lack of the trust in the media being produced.

Additionally, the manipulation of this image brings around another question because if this had been a scene of a British city for example would the British media be comfortable with distributing this kind of image. It seems that photographs which depict horrific scenes of conflict, violence or the aftermath are produced and passed on if they seem to show a world in which the consumer may regard as 'other', if it is not something they believe will happen to them or even in a place near them. Is it the case that in the society we will currently live in is it more socially acceptable if something bad happens to someone that we deem to be different to ourselves?



1992 © KENNETH JARECKE (CONTACT PRESS IMAGES)

Fig 2.

This idea is particularly highlighted when considering the image of a charred Iraqi soldier Fig 2., as I do not believe that an image like this would have been distributed if it contained the image of a charred British soldier. However, it is not to be said that this image did not receive any backlash when it was originally produced, perhaps because most American press decided not to publish the image due to its graphic content. 'Sometimes though, omitting an image means shielding the public from the messy, imprecise consequences of a war—making the coverage incomplete, and even deceptive' (DeGhett, 2014), I do think that by selecting a different image this would have taken on a different form of manipulation as many other images of war depict a glory filled action scene. When questioned the intention of this photograph Jarecke is quoted to have said 'But if I don't take pictures like these, people like my mom will think war is what they see in movies' (Jarecke, 1991), which to me encapsulates the very reason why photographers take this kind of image and why work like this is mass distributed.

In the world of mobile phones and social media we are used to feeling like we have constant access to everyone's lives and with the capabilities of these devices simply getting better and better having access to conflict and terrible incidents is no exception. The citizens have become the journalists, instead of needing to have someone in the right place at the right time, there is simply always someone in the right place with an image making device and usually they are in their hundreds, meaning an endless stream of images being produced for the media to redistribute at their leisure. 'Everyday, a fresh wave of information reaches our computers and phone screens, but not only are we the recipients of this constant flow, we are now the creators.' (Dangerfield, 2015).

The responsibility of being the photographer for the everyday citizen is something that does not mean as much anymore as we have this constant influx of images it just feels like they are adding one more image to the endless stream. This does not stop people from pulling out their phones during a crisis which has replaced many people's instant reaction of trying to help which has now turned more to a desire to document.

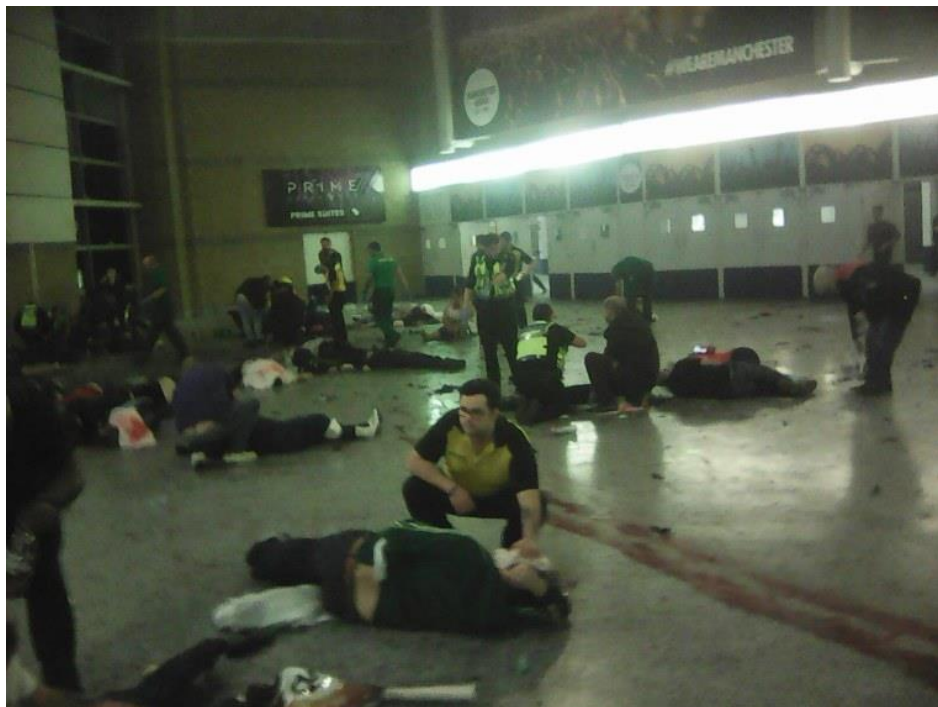


Fig. 3

Images from within terrorist attacks like the Manchester Arena attack are one of the most common products of citizen journalism which seem to break down the idea of empathy fatigue. Something about the low quality, grainy, mobile phone images bring a sense of personal connection to the image instead of people feeling distanced from the high-quality press images depicting far-removed locations they seem to show what people value as 'real-life'. In a world of fake news and 'click-bait' (Geiger, 2006) people regard this kind of media

as refreshing because they feel they can trust what they are seeing as they believe the images have been produced by someone like them.

Many conflict photographers also work with different medias in order for their images to stand out and tell their story. Technology can be and is utilised in many ways to make images, from considering traditional warfare technology used or even branching into the virtual world a wide range of work is produced.



Fig 4.

The work Richard Mosse produces particularly capitalises on the idea of inverting the use of military equipment such as discontinued infrared film to make the series of images *Infra*.

The use of traditional military equipment which would traditionally be used to seek out people is being used to highlight the impact of conflict on the people or an area. 'It could be a surreal idyll if it weren't for the human skull' (Gladstone, 2021), juxtaposing the bright

colours with the serious tones of the photographs creates extremely eye-catching images which haunt the viewer with questions as to what has happened prior to create this scene. As the photographic film creates colours like pink which are traditionally scene as visually appealing and fun images, it will work to draw the eye to the images where people may only discover the darker truth when taking a closer look. Using film which is described as 'film that registers a spectrum of light beyond what the human eye can see' adds another interesting layer because it suggests that just like we are unable to see the colours that are always there, we are unable to see the violent acts and events because they are something we simply cannot bring ourselves to understand.



Fig 5.

Although not directly connected I was reminded of the series' *First Person Shooter* by Thibault Brunet by the use of technology not for its traditional purpose. Just like the photographic film

used by Mosse was not intended to be used to make art, the use of video games like *Call of Duty* creates an interesting dynamic and tension.

In society with have a fascination with exploring things digitally that we may not ever experience in real life- 'The desire "to see" is most evident in the "safety" of entertainment-based explorations and fantasies detailing and imagining violence.' (Schott, 2016). This idea is explored within this project as it is easy to forget that although these games are not real-life they still glorify and commodify the idea of violence. People who would never dream of significant violence in their everyday lives often spend hours living out an alternative lifestyle through the eyes of a video game character. Creating a set of self-portraiture aims to make people feel a connection with the character and some may not even initially realise that they are not looking at a real person. The work also comments on the evolution of technology which has meant that virtual worlds increasingly merge with the real world meaning ironically the more connected people are the more disconnected they become.

Photography is so often used to document active conflict and the devastating effects of violence as seen in the example through this essay and it is easy to forget it can also be used to document peace. With every conflict there comes peace even if it is only momentarily, this is just a valid part of conflict as the violence itself.



Fig 6.

The idea of using photography as a way to explore and promote peace is one that Fig 6. comments on, the image was taken from a collaborative project where local photographers in Columbia were asked to take images which they defined as peace. When asked about this image the photographer stated “In a world full of doubt and uncertainty, we can be calm in the knowledge that, when we go out to the streets or to our land, we will not hear the terrifying sound of guns” (Ferraro, 2020), this demonstrates that the subject of the image may not be obviously peace when someone like ourselves considers it but for people in a previously conflict ridden area it has everything to do with peace. A project called *Lenses of Conflict and Peace* was implemented in Kenya in 2016 which aimed to teach people, who lived in Kenyan slums during political conflict, how to use digital technology to help people recover from conflict in their areas. After teaching the participants how to use a digital camera they feel empowered and are then asked to take images that they believe express how they feel about the situation, ‘this type of project design can ultimately contribute to processes of social change in the aftermath of violence’ (Bau, 2016). By the members of the community producing work in their own way it helps them to reflect on the events and also work towards a better society where they can understand the conflict that surrounded them.

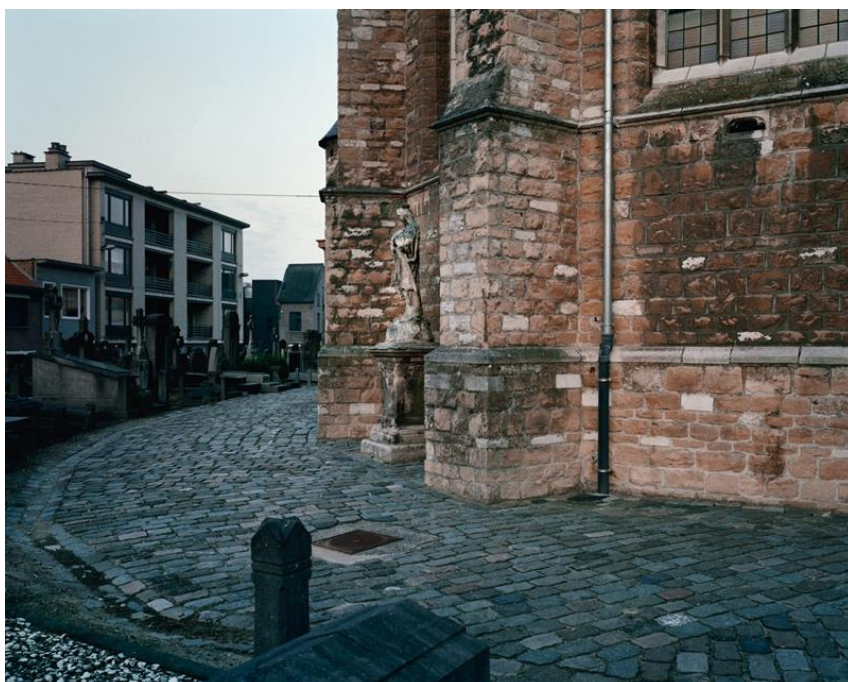


Fig 7.

Peace photography in some ways is better at portraying conflict than images of violence themselves. The *Shot at Dawn* series that Fig 7. is included in highlights the violence that took place in the past by showing places where soldiers were murdered 100 years before by in the present day. The usually empty images give the viewer a haunting feeling as if the locations are empty because of the deaths that have taken place in them. 'In order to change the rules of the world, the image of the world had to be changed as well' (Moller, 2019). Showing people, the quiet peacefulness of these locations through photography promotes idea that conflict only leaves scars on people and places and they should be a lesson to avoid conflict. The images do not always need to be shocking or graphic in order to provide a message and perhaps this is the new best tactic to get around the shock fatigue that people generally experience. Peace photography is the equivalent to having a quiet word with someone rather than a screaming argument.

There are many ways that image makes utilise digital technology to make work that comments on ideas of conflict. It is a multi-faceted and complex idea that has no clear definition of how work surrounding it should be produced. The range of visual work included in this essay display a small insight into the vast world of conflict photography. A graphic high-quality image of a man burnt alive published in the media and a low-quality mobile phone image of a terrorist attack both work to make the viewer of the image feel something about the event and hope to instil the idea that conflict is something the world should steer away from as generally little is achieved other than hurt. There are many moral discussions to be had surrounding what we should photograph when it comes to violence, and I think we will only truly understand the effect of these images as we become further saturated with them

and they become further integrated into our lives. As the way we make images continues to change could it be possible that in years to come the education system will be using images taken on a mobile phone or conflict in textbooks? Although often the content of conflict images is not something that appeals to me and I am unsure of my own moral position surrounding them I do find it fascinating to watch the evolution of technology and the effect it is having on the type of conflict images we are seeing, I feel it prompts me to question how I produce images and how I would react if I had a camera during a situation of conflict or violence.

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