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BA: Documentary photography and visual activism

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Question 1: Using at least 3 examples, consider how image makers have utilised digital technology to explore at least one of the following: Conflict, the Environment, Identity, the Surveillance State, the Technology Society?

Illustration

Figure 1: *Martial 1914–19 (Shot at Dawn / Chloe Dewe Mathews, n.d.)*

Figure 2: Rwanda (*James Nachtwey, n.d.*)

Figure 3 *Infra Richard Mosse: Infra – OEG, n.d.*)

Within this essay I have found photographers that used their photography to document key events in war that people would normally brush over or have been forgotten about in history.

The photographers works in this essay show the important in documentary photography in a modern society of how we are fed all are information through the media.



Figure 1

The number of soldiers in the British army who were executed by firing squad during the first world war is utterly insignificant compared with the massive carnage at the front... at the time of their condemnation (these soldier) were branded as 'shirker', 'funk' and 'degenerate', whose very existence was best forgotten.

Mathews photographed the places where soldiers were sent to be executed for deserting out of fear. 'Shot at dawn' when you think the word dawn you think of beauty, the bringing of a new day and peace not death of men executed by firing squad bring the end of someone's life. When putting the three words shot at dawn the first thought is an image of a sunrise but when

put into context with the images it has the darker history where soldiers were shot at dawn for deserting. In this kind of imagery, you can see the conflict without seeing the violence that we associate conflict with once you put it within context. Looking at this image 'shot at dawn' is cold and desolate like you know what happened there without seeing the deaths happen themselves. 'Reality has always been interpreted through the reports given by images.' (Sontag, 2019) Using images today is our way of communication of what's happening in the world by using images we're able to document conflict and violence through the years. The only way we know about any kinds of conflicts in the world is by people using Technology to document what's going on no matter how disturbing or graphic it may be so the difference of Matthews work and the media is the lack of conflict and violence but this images gives you a better understanding of conflict and how people can be very much forgotten throughout history because it's so easy to forget people who were caught up in the violence and conflict, and by documenting places where men were shot for desertion give people a clear understanding of what happens to people outside of the actual fighting itself and how quickly we forget about it because there is little to none image documentation because people have to see it to believe it's actually happening. '*To photograph is to confer importance*' (Sontag 2019) Saying a photograph is to confer importance I strongly agree with when it comes to taking images today and in the past. Taking photograph today just a snapshot to document are everyday lives, protest, violence and conflicts across the world through technology. By using technology to communicate what's happening in the world with conflict but the only issue is that things today can be fake or staged but people can lose history or people get forgotten.



Figure 2

Rwanda - Hutu refugees were struck by cholera and buried in mass graves.
*have been a witness, and these pictures are my testimony. The events I have
 recorded should not be forgotten and must not be repeated.*

(James Nachtwey, n.d.)

All the images that Nachtwey documents are images that will stick with a viewer his images a meant to shock or almost provoke a viewer showing them, what conflict can be like for other countries, how the conflict can affect them by showing through documentation. *'Nobody ever discovered ugliness through photographs.'* (Sontag 2019, page 90) With this quote I completely disagree with because some of the ugliest parts of humanity is captured through photography, by linking this quote back to *Rwanda* it captures how ugly war can become when people are fighting against one and other. Nachtwey showing through photography the raw imagery of *Rwanda* shows how ugly and brutal people can become and it shown through photography so it completely contradicts what Sontag has written. *'Who believes today that war can be abolished? No one, not even pacifists.'*

(Susan Sontag, 2003) With this quote partly and mostly agree will never be abolished because of how normalized it has become through the decades like seeing war and conflict on the news or over the social media seeing graphic imagery like Nachtwey is normal to see because of the digital world we live in so, seeing imagery so raw and not censored is normal and extremely excitable. How war and conflict is without a doubt the most accessible thing on the internet.

'The relationship between war and photography mirror that crisis of representation synonymous with modern times.'(Stallabrass, 2013, p.115)

With this statement I agree with because there has always been a relationship between them because you cannot without one you can't have the other although there will always be war. Without the uses of photography documentation we wouldn't have a clear insight into the darker parts of war And what people don't truly want to see. The concept that photography has always been used to document what's going on in there live from taking a selfie to documenting crises in the world.

'For a long time, some people believed that if the horror could be made vivid enough, most people would finally in the outrageousness, the inanity of war.'

(Susan Sontag, 2003) If people in today's technological society saw the true horrors of war and conflict it would make people sick but because seeing these kinds of images is so normal we just look past it like its nothing so practitioners like Nachtwey want people to listen and see what's happening in the world. *'There is a job to be done... to record the truth. I want to wake people up!'* (Photo Quotes, n.d.) We find with practitioners that record conflict are showing the world how brutal and brutal the world can be by recording wars and violence show how much that the world has not changed and should change.



Figure 3

On his journeys in eastern Congo between 2010-11, Mosse photographed rebel groups constantly switching allegiances, fighting nomadically in a jungle war zone plagued by frequent ambushes, massacres, and systematic sexual violence.

By using just, the place as the main title of the work gives the viewer a clear understanding of what happened there, but just having by having images of the rebel forces standing and not actually fighting in a somewhat of a beautiful landscape. I find with this series it has a completely different tone with these images where these images are more colourful and vibrant even when it's a whole series is about war and conflict. Having the images being in vibrant because of the background of the place itself would make the audience think that the series is about something quite joyful when it truly isn't. Seeing the colours pinks and purples which can be seen as "feminine" colours that can be symbolising the systematic sexual violence in the jungle war zone. Once you read more into the context of the images you can find that having the soldiers standing in the beauty of the background and not seeing the carnage and violence that has plagued that area. Compared to the other images that I have chosen as examples, where the images 'shot at dawn' and 'Rwanda' have cooler and darker tones to them *Infra* have warmer tone so that drastic contrast to the

other images because of the uses of colour. When people see a bright colourful image people think its happy and joyful but *Infra* has a darker story behind the images but by having them as bright colourful imagery it catches the viewers' attention then they can see the deeper meaning.

Infra, Richard Mosse's first book, offers a radical rethinking of how to depict a conflict as complex and intractable as that of the ongoing war in the Democratic Republic of Congo.' (Aperture, 2024)

When taking it into consideration that the whole idea of this series of images was made to be shown in book form as well as in a gallery setting within a technological society were people only look at things if it's on a screen in front of them.

'Images of dead civilians and smashed houses may serve to quicken hatred of the foe' (Sontag, 2003) In some part I agree with this statement because to get people to hate someone or something you show them the worst thing that they have done but with 'infra' Mosse doesn't show what the other side has done to the people he shows the rebels as a strong hold with no fear of the enemy but describing what been going on there in the description of his work and not wholly relying on his images to tell the audience what's going on. This series doesn't show how violent the conflict was but by showing how complex conflict and violence can be by documenting it through imagery and descriptions it will give people a better understanding.

When you think about how people used to document history of conflict, they were only able to write down what was going on in that point in time not using any kind of technology to help them know what's going on so it's only written from one person's point a view so can't be seen as exactly truthful. But also considering how people today can use photoshop to manipulate images so half the time we wouldn't know how truthful an image is today.

With all the images i selected it all of them are showing the parts of history that people are trying to forget because of the amount of violence people can afflict onto each other even if there fighting for the same cause 'shot at dawn' shows this perfectly because of the Matthews is documenting the places where British soldiers were shot by their own side because they were scared and deserted but by Matthews documenting these place the men that died there are no longer forgotten and not just seen as the cowards of WW1. 'Rwanda' by James Nachtwey imagery can show people today how history can repeat itself time and time again because throughout history we have seen mass gendercides but not many people have documented it in the same way as Nachtwey, he's showing it in such a way so that people will not forget the images of Rwanda that he took how brutal that humanity can be towards each other and we still see it today even if we don't want to acknowledge that it's still going on.

But on a completely different way to show conflict Mosse's *Infra* shows how complex conflict can become but also by not showing the audience what the actual violence that plagued that area but when showing this kind of conflict in the way he did might even make the people think and do their own research and not just look at the imagery but by only describing what happened there in the description of what happen there along with the images might also give people a better understanding of why he didn't photograph the true conflict. But the colouring in these images my just speak for themselves.

I find in today technological society it's much harder to get caught up in what's real and what is fake when it comes to violence and conflict because most people in today society will just go off what the news is saying or even the history books but even then, they are both not entirely truthful because its

only telling one side of the story. I do believe that we need technology to document what's going on in the world, but I do believe that it needs to be used in the right way not by being deceitful and making people only believe one thing that's going on because there's always another story not just one. Within my research of the documentation of conflict and how people's perception can change on what kind of images they see. When it comes to conflict the first place you see want them to see. War is something that we've very much have got used to seeing on social media platforms where everything is assessable to find so makes it extremely available to find but not all images that you can find are manipulated or fake, so people don't know the truth.

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