

## BRIGHTON PHOTO BIENNIAL 2008

### Julian Stallabrass and Ashley Gilbertson – in conversation

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['In Conversation: Julian Stallabrass and Ashley Gilbertson', *Journal of Visual Culture*, vol. 8, no. 3, December 2009, pp. 349-57.]



Figure 1: May, 2004. Specialist William Wimberley watches George W. Bush apologise on behalf of the US military for the torture that took place at Abu Ghraib prison.

Ashley Gilbertson photographed the Iraq War for the *New York Times*, and wrote a book, *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot*, that reflected on his experiences and put together a visual argument about the conduct of the war.<sup>1</sup> He won the Robert Capa Gold Medal for his photojournalism in 2005. Here he talks to Julian Stallabrass, the curator of the 2008 Brighton Photo Biennial, 'Memory of Fire: Images of War and the War of Images'.

**JS:** Maybe we could begin with the question of embedding, by which photographers and journalists are the guests of a particular military unit for a while, and may only leave by abandoning the embed entirely, uncertain when or whether they will get another. You worked in Iraq both as a so-called unilateral for a while, in other words an independent photojournalist, but then you started doing embeds. Maybe you could say why you wanted to work that way, and how you think the system not only affected you, but also how it affects the wider practise of photojournalism.

**AG:** I think you need to be very conscious of what you're doing when you're embedding. I mean I feel that I've embedded with pretty much every one of my subjects over the years. It's just the Pentagon came up with a really ugly name for what we do. I think you

'embed' with your loved one; you don't 'embed' with a group of Marines in Fallujah. Our goal as photojournalists is to spend as much time with a subject as humanly possible. We are living and breathing and eating and sleeping with them. You gain so much trust that way, and you actually start seeing more intimate moments of people's lives. So I don't think it's anything different from what we normally do. The reason to embed is for that reason, for the access, for that intimacy, to see what they see and to feel what they feel, although the Pentagon has put rules on what we do and how we work. Most of those rules are pretty much nonsense, except there's one clause that's been changing over the years, which is, I think it's '13b', it's like something from *Catch-22*, and that is the rule that stipulates in the case of dead or wounded soldiers or marines, you are to hold those photographs until the next of kin has been notified, which is a course fair enough.<sup>2</sup> However they changed that in the last eighteenth months so that you can't take any photographs of anyone who's been killed or wounded unless you have a prior, written form of consent. So if you can imagine standing there, and this is the U.S. military, and these guys are from Texas, so you stand in front of them and say, 'Hi, my name's Ashley Gilbertson and I'm from the *New York Times*' – what they hear is 'Hi, my name's Disgusting Pig Vulture, I'm from the Jew York Times, and I want you to sign this thing that says that it's OK that I photograph you in the case that you're killed'. That completely cuts out a *huge* amount of coverage of this war that we can't create anymore. I'm obviously absolutely furious about it. I think that it's actually denying the historical aspect of what's happening there. I mean, they're trying to gentrify what's a very, very ugly thing to be involved in. It's the whole thing of staying on message.



**Figure 2:** March, 2004. A man and a boy venture outside to assess the damage to their Samarra neighbourhood. The boy carries a white flag to show that he is a non-combatant. Most residents carried flags like this, but that didn't stop US soldiers from aiming weapons at them.

**JS:** Critics of embedding say two kinds of things about it. One is that very identification with the troops you're with and maybe living with them for a number of months, you

become too sympathetic; you really adopt the view of the military rather than that of the civilians. While I think that some of your photographs are proof of the opposite, there may be a tendency there. The other is that you necessarily have a very narrow view of the war, very like a pin-hole view, focused on a narrow set of experiences, and it's difficult for you to place what you are seeing in a wider perspective. Are you allowed to talk to civilians if you're on an embed for instance?

**AG:** You can, except you're using military translators. That's why we at the *New York Times* take our own translators on embeds now. So you go through tapes – you do a quick interview with a civilian on the street and the military translator will say, 'Oh – he's very happy to have the Americans here, he says that the Americans bring him fruit and school books', and you go back and he's like 'I want them to burn in hell', you know – so you need to bring your own translators. Some units are very, very open, and the translators are very good, except that's not all that common. But as far as getting too close to the unit, I only had that problem once in Samarra' when I realised I did not take a picture I could have out of sympathetic feelings towards the soldiers, and I have been very careful never to let that happen since. Mostly soldiers realise you are just trying to do your job, and they let you get on with it. So I actually think we've been able to work very freely. I've never spent as much as a whole month embedded in any unit so as to actually get that close to it. I know there are some photographers who have spent twelve months embedded with one unit, which would drive me nuts. But as far as looking at things from a very, very small, like a pin-hole perspective – it's true, except this is also the case when you're working with Iraqi civilians – if you're working in Sadr City and you're on one street, that's only one street. There's an entire city of Baghdad out there, and the whole country beyond that. I mean, we have a hundred Iraqi journalists and fixers working for us at any given time so that we actually can construct a picture of what's happening in Iraq. We're talking to high-ranking officers, we're talking to the prime minister every other day, to ensure that we know everything that's happening at every level of Iraqi society. I think to go in there now as a unilateral journalist without that support system, you would have enormous trouble.

**JS:** How did the military tend to see you? You mentioned quite a cultural divide between you and these young American soldiers, but there's an officer class as well, there's the Pentagon itself which was anxious to court the media for this war, which was a change from its practice since Vietnam. Can you talk about your relationship with the media and whether you felt there were times when you couldn't do what you wanted to do because of the soldiers' disapproval, or anything of that sort?

**AG:** Well as a photographer, I won't do an embed if they're going to take me on some dog-and-pony show. Well, of course I've done some dog-and-pony shows that are pretty funny, I mean where they take out a gigantic pair of scissors and do a ribbon-cutting on a bridge in Tikrit that they had blown up during the war. But I've kind of got an advantage over an American reporter going in and talking to all these soldiers. I'm an Australian guy, I swear like, a lot, I smoke a lot, I've got these fancy cameras they love playing with. They're immediately interested, they're like 'What the hell... who the hell is this guy and what is he doing here?' Politics never comes into any conversations that I have because I'm not Republican or Democrat. I'm from some weird country in the South Pacific. So there's this sort of interest there that really puts them off-guard. I won't do an embed unless it's with a unit that's actually out on the front, like, on point. There's no point being on the second line, or the third line because you don't see anything. You need to be with the very, very first unit. Then they can't stop me from seeing anything. When

they shoot at civilians, they can't hide that from me. They can say 'Don't pick up your fucking camera or we'll shoot you in the head'. For example, when a Marine is killed and I go to take pictures and they freak out, I actually feel like I've had my life threatened by soldiers or Marines when that happens. I understand that it's an intense, emotional experience that they're going through, and to have some jackass photographer try to take pictures of it – you're going to react strongly, except back then rules said I could do it. So it's basically only when someone has been killed or wounded that I've had difficulties working.

**JS:** And to look at the other side of the picture, what about the attitudes of Iraqi civilians to your presence and to being photographed?

**AG:** I think at the outset they were happy to talk to us and they were interested that maybe we could help them. You need to think of the history of Iraq, the recent history of Iraq. Any media working in Iraq was answering straight to Saddam. It was all state-controlled media. So when we came in, and showed our press cards, that said we were independent reporters, that didn't really click. They thought that when they're telling us something, it's going straight back to George Bush. So initially I think they were actually quite happy to talk to us because they felt that President Bush would listen, and say 'OK, look we need to change this, we need to do this'. After a couple of years they realised that in fact we're a pretty useless bunch and that the President doesn't read the *Times*. And then it got to a point where if Iraqis were seen talking to foreign reporters or inviting them into their house, they'd be killed, which again made access a lot more difficult. Now we can talk to civilians again, but you need these stupid pieces of paper from the Ministry of Defence because apparently it's an Iraqi operation now, which makes it almost impossible to get into a neighbourhood, and when you do get into that neighbourhood that you've been waiting for weeks to get into, the Iraqi military follow you everywhere you go. So if you can imagine pulling up outside someone's house with three Humvees behind you and all these guys with guns, like, hanging outside their house, it doesn't really make for a good open dialogue.

**JS:** Amazing. I mean it's one of the big contrasts with Vietnam I think, because there were plenty of stories that came out that showed that at least *some* of the subjects of those pictures were very conscious of what their image might do in the Western media, and certainly the National Liberation Front, and the North Vietnamese Army generally were aware of the effects these images were having, and even went out of their way to protect photojournalists to an extent. It seems that in Iraq the opposite is true.

**AG:** Well we're targets, we're infidels. We're the spokespeople for the infidels coming in trying to conquer the Middle East. I mean that's how they see us. We've got communiqués from [Abu Musab] al-Zarqawi himself that say 'We're going after the Western press'. When they double suicide-bombed the Hotel Palestine, they were trying to take out the Associated Press. That was a direct attack on them. They've killed, they've beheaded reporters... there have been more reporters killed in this war than any other war to date, and that's because we are targets.

**JS:** Do you know why the Iraqi resistance is not at all interested in Western public opinion, or influencing it through the media, which would seem to be an obvious route for them.

**AG:** There's certainly websites, I mean they're constantly changing them. We've got one guy in the newsroom who's job it is to keep track of where these websites are going, and there are entire institutes dedicated to this, both in London and Washington that track both Jihadi and nationalist websites. If you're in the loop, if you sitting in Peshawar, it's not very difficult to find those websites, but for us non-Arabic speakers, they are very, very difficult to find. They don't want to reach out to us. In the case of Al Qaeda, they just want us finished. In the case of the nationalists, they did finally reach out, but there's no unified front. I mean, we're talking about sheikhs in villages who haven't got water, let alone cell phones and computers. The nationalists were a disenfranchised group of Sunnis that had no other choice but to fight. Now they've been brought back into the fold, or brought into the fold with the awakening councils that's somewhat changed but again, any settlement is very, very fragile.

**JS:** I wonder if you could talk a little about changing demands of the press. I hope those of you who have seen the University of Brighton show, 'Iraq Through the Lens of Vietnam', as you walk through from the Vietnam room to the Iraq room, there are many kinds of changes to think about. And there seems to be qualitative changes in the photography. What it is that the press wants from you as a photographer?



**Figure 3:** Wire photographers pose a soldier to photograph his ink-stained finger, signifying that he had voted in the December 2005 national election.

**AG:** Lot's of pictures, as often as possible, and digital technology has made that a hell of a lot harder. We used to be able to tell a lot of white lies and say we can't get the film out today, and that would give us a couple of extra days to work on a story and create stronger pictures, but now we can't do that. Now we've got satellite phones, satellite special Internet connections, we have laptops, we have little things we can charge all of our equipment from from car batteries, and of course the digital cameras – we've got no excuse any more. And I think the pressure on photojournalists has actually become a lot more intense. I mean we have to do all of our own editing, all of our own captioning, we have to file. I mean, I never did this in Iraq, but in America for example I covered the

hurricane in New Orleans, and I had to file five times a day for the website. It was nonsense, I could hardly work. This is the problem. Even so, newspapers are still superior to television, because television is so busy, standing in front of cameras doing live updates every fifteen minutes, that they can't report. I was told by mast head editors at the *Times* before I went on this last trip that 'we'll no longer judge by your front page stories and pictures. We'll now judge you by what you put on the website and on the blog' – which is crap. I also think that that level of pressure when there are so many photographers working and transmitting that often, means that some photographers buckle under the strain. There is the case of the photographer with the *LA Times*, who had those two pictures, that were great by themselves, of the British Marine telling a civilian to sit down, and then the civilian trying to get up with his baby and run. They were both good pictures but he felt they were even better spliced together as one. So he did a pretty good job on Photoshop putting these things together. It landed on the front page of the paper, and an Iraqi back in LA picked up the paper and was looking for relatives and found the same guy twice, and called the paper and they fired the photographer.<sup>3</sup> I think that, not only do we need to be more careful, I mean we have to do less work on our pictures than we used to do in the darkroom. The unofficial rule was if you can do it in your darkroom you can do it in your pictures in Photoshop, but I think you actually have to do less than that now, because there is so much manipulation being done out there we actually need to stand back and be above that as press. Our role and our credibility is constantly being threatened and undermined, so I actually think that we have to be more credible, and do less work in our pictures to increase that credibility.

**JS:** To continue with this 'demands of the press' issue, has it ever surprised you which of your images have been picked up and been successful, and are there images that you've taken which you would have liked to have seen out there but were killed or just not used for various reasons?



**Figure 4:** March, 2004. Army policy is to leave dead Iraqis for other Iraqis to recover and bury. The body of the Madhi Army fighter was an object of curiosity for GIs, one of whom takes a snapshot with his digital camera.

**AG:** The picture of the MP photographing the dead Mahdi Army soldier never ran and I thought that was one of my strongest pictures. Every picture of wounded and dead American soldiers that I've shot, which is only a handful, have all run except they only run in the *Times*, they don't go on *Time* magazine or *Newsweek* or anything like that, but they often pick up the softer pictures. One picture that I shot quite literally as a joke, of this one soldier standing in the sunset with his gun raised and looking like a frigging hero—it was such a stupid picture... but I filed it and sent it back to the paper and it's like, I guess this running joke that we have with the picture editors, and they're like 'Yeah that's great, Ash, thanks a lot'. The picture has sold so many times, every three months when I get my stock, my quarterly stock thing from the agency, you know, 'Soldier in Sunset', 'Soldier in Sunset' – everybody loves it, it's crap, I shot it as a joke! The difficulty is you look at the images from Vietnam and those pictures have had forty years to actually gain traction and become iconic, images that we all know very well. The pictures in the Iraq room are all very, very fresh, and I wish that people would pick up more stuff from the war that's been shot over the years, except pretty much all editors in both Europe and the States want stuff that was shot last week. They're looking for the really fresh stuff and stock stuff very rarely gets used.

**JS:** That's very interesting. You live in the States now. What has been the public reaction to your work? Of course, you have a reputation obviously as a photojournalist but do you have much understanding of the broader reception of your work, and do you get communications from members of the public, particularly in the States?

**AG:** Yeah, especially when I launched my book I actually got a lot. You get emails while you are away and people write to you and like, 'Thanks a lot for your job' or they say you're a scumbag or a pig, get out of Iraq or whatever, but when I did the book tour I got a lot of reaction from people both at readings and when I did a radio or television appearance you get a flood of emails, and largely people were glad for the role that photojournalists are playing in Iraq. I mean, these are actually people who take time to write so they obviously feel pretty strongly already, except they're really appreciative that we're actually there doing a job and I think that a *lot* of the American public realise there's very few of us left doing this anymore, and at any given time you've got half a dozen photographers working in Iraq, and then you've got maybe a dozen foreign reporters working in Iraq. This is the largest story that our generation is going to cover and there's almost no reporters covering the thing. In fact, I was out to dinner the other night with the ABC Bureau chief for Saigon during the Vietnam War, and he said, 'Your newspapers are falling to pieces, there's not enough ink being put into the Iraq story any more', and I said 'Well, was there much more airtime devoted to Vietnam towards the end?' and he said 'Right, there are parallels'. People were just exhausted, and there was very little space on TV or in print devoted to the conflicts as they dragged on for years.

**JS:** No, that's true. But the character of those reactions –you're saying that they're mostly supportive. So you don't get large amounts of mail from right-wing pro-war activists?

**AG:** I do get some. I try to control myself and not write back, but you get some really crazy ones, people who are really angry. One of these jackasses went through my book and took every single fact, as has been reported in the *Times* – like, I use that as my benchmark – took every single fact, like, questioned the thing, sent me this furious email swearing at me, and I take it all really personally as well so it makes me pretty mad. And I think for every ten positive emails you get one crackpot. But a lot of the Right have

supported the book as well. I mean both Left and Right, soldiers and civilians have liked the book. The soldiers are say, 'You told it like it is', and for all the stuff that they did wrong, that they're responsible for, they realise that I'm not out there to paint a bad picture of them; I'm there to paint *a* picture of them as I saw it. This whole idea of objectivity and subjectivity, I think it was Gene Smith who said –subjectivity, no, but honesty, yes. Or objectivity, no, honesty, yes. That makes more sense doesn't it?<sup>4</sup>

## References

Gilbertson, A. (2007) *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot: A Photographer's Chronicle of the Iraq War*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Katovsky, B. and Carlson, T., (2003) *Embedded: The Media War in Iraq*, Guilford, Connecticut: The Lyons Press

Smith E.W., (1948) 'Photographic Journalism', *Photo Notes*, pp. 4-5.

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<sup>1</sup> Gilbertson, A. (2007) *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot: A Photographer's Chronicle of the Iraq War*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>2</sup> The rule reads: '4.H.1. Media representatives will be reminded of the sensitivity of using names of individual casualties or photographs they may have taken which clearly identify casualties until after notification of the NOK and release by OASD(PA).' The initial embed rules are reproduced in Katovsky, B. and Carlson, T., (2003) *Embedded: The Media War in Iraq*, Guilford, Connecticut: The Lyons Press, pp. 401-17.

<sup>3</sup> Brian Walski, an *LA Times* staff photographer, was fired in April 2003, and the *Times* published a note describing the manipulation and reproducing its component images.

<sup>4</sup> 'The journalistic photographer can have no other than a personal approach; and it is impossible for him to be completely objective. Honest—yes. Objective—no.' Smith E.W., (1948) 'Photographic Journalism', *Photo Notes*, p. 4.