# Simon Norfolk: Afghanistan Chronotopia

Julian Stallabrass

'Simon Norfolk', in The Photographers' Gallery, *Citibank Photography Prize 2003*, London 2003, pp. 45-6.

It has at least a tinge of absurdity, the image of Simon Norfolk, picking his way among unexploded munitions in an invaded and devastated country, lugging a wood and brass plate camera, and throwing the black cloth over his head to record slowly the ruins laid out before him. Some Afghans certainly found it amusing.

The resulting photographs contain a series of contradictions: the lyrical beauty of desert and mountain landscapes at sunrise, gentle rosy and golden light tracing out the textures of every crag and fissure, broken brick and mortar tailfin, while also softly illuminating the clouds. Collapsed into these images are references to Claude Lorrain (grand structures past their best and tiny figures dwarfed by the larger masses of nature under which the passing of inhuman stretches of time will inter them both), Roger Fenton and Matthew Brady (solidly recording the still aspects of war, particularly the scenes following battle—debris and spent ammunition) and the subject-matter of contemporary photojournalism. Norfolk intends that, in the viewer's mind, the beauty of the landscapes will collide with the terrible knowledge of what took place within them.[1] Photojournalism is brought up against the large scale and considered naturalism of museum photography which, in its exclusive presentation of a seamlessly detailed visual field, bestows on a scene (all other senses being silenced) a hyper-real and spectacular air. The techniques and distance taken from the subject expected of German neo-modernist photography is applied, not to the mundane and regulated aspects of life in the administered world, but to that world's very destruction.

[1] Norfolk quoted in Liese Spencer, 'After the Terror', *The Scotsman*, 7 September 2002.

The title, 'Chronotopia', taken from a concept of the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, points to the interweaving and inseparability of time and space in these photographs.[2] Places that register the passing of time have long been attractive to photographers, especially the dense palimpsests of time-frames found in old cities, not least because each photograph is a chronotope itself, a spatial trace of a moment that starts to take an increasingly broad distance from its subject the moment after it is taken. For Norfolk, different types of fighting and weaponry produce their own particular marks on buildings and the landscape which can be identified and picked apart into archaeological layers that indicate phases of the conflict's history.[3] Street-fighting with small arms, over years, marks the faces of buildings as rain marks sand, while modern US bombs and missiles can pulverise structures, leaving barely a remnant. The attraction of photographers to war

[2] M.M. Bakhtin, 'Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Carly Emerson/ Michael Holquist, University of Texas Press, Austin 1981.
[3] Simon Norfolk, *Afghanistan Chronotopia*, Dewi Lewis Publishing, Stockport 2002, n.p.

ruins is like their affinity for scars, each the marking of a surface that indicates the presence of an object now absent, just as photons mark a light-sensitive plate.

Unearthing the history of the conflict from these traces is a painstaking task, for prolonged war collapses time-frames as if ageing had accelerated, so that all structures—modern concrete blocks, faux neo-classical palaces, historical buildings and ruins themselves—take on the same appearance, halfway to returning to the landscape from which they had been wrought. Perhaps it is the destruction of modernity itself over two decades of warfare in Afghanistan that makes the timeless beauty of Norfolk's photographs plausible. The ugly vernacular apparatus of modern life has gone—Kabul's bus fleet lies stripped on the outskirts of the city, broken-backed airliners point their noses at the sky, electricity poles are decapitated, concrete floors sag against each other in an anthropomorphic gesture they lacked when functional, and roads are empty. The result is the negative image of the developed world's contemporary urban environment (which is an equally time-flattened parade of the new), and the two worlds are structurally connected, the one being manufactured in the Cold War to help ensure the settled continuation of the other.

As with his earlier recording of the sites of genocide, Norfolk's Afghanistan photographs are meant to stand as acts of memory, and of a forensic exhuming of history against the continual present-case mode of the mass media, which rarely registers Afghan victims of the war except as statistics, and which generally forgets that the West's current enemies were created, armed and trained by its own covert forces in the war against Communism (drug-running religious zealots being preferable to even Brezhnev-era Reds).[4] In this, his work appears to serve similar purposes to Gilles Peress's refined and horrific monochrome photographs, the result of picking through the remains of genocidal murders in Rwanda and Bosnia, and Richard Misrach's long-term unearthing of the nuclear secrets of the Nevada desert in large-scale, and similarly beautiful coloured photographs of abandoned military ranges and pits where the corpses of farm animals, perhaps radiation-poisoned, have been dumped.[5]

If absurdities proliferate in war, an engine of contingency that tends to derange its participants, and sometimes appears to become a vast, overarching absurdity itself, this belies and masks the precise, brutal calculations that lie behind its prosecution, including the rational consideration (as Nixon had it) that it may be best if your opponent considers you a little insane. Norfolk, cutting an eccentric figure himself, photographed some bizarre sights, including a forlorn balloon-seller posed by the concrete skeleton of a teahouse, remade, says the photographer, as Stonehenge. In one picture of a bus terminal with triple reinforced concrete arches outlined against a sky at dawn or dusk, the crumbling masonry produces a McDonald's logo. Like many apparent absurdities, this indicates a buried truth, raising the memory of the long history of imperial wars waged systematically and ruthlessly to make the world safe for consumerism (a point made forcefully by Phillip Jones-Griffiths in his great book on the Vietnam war, and in the horrific and comic last scene of Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*, where the Marines march through a devastated townscape singing of Mickey Mouse).[6]

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[4] Simon Norfolk, *For Most of it I Have No Words: Genocide-Landscape-Memory*, Dewi Lewis Publishing, Stockport 1998.
[5] Gilles Peress, *The Silence*, Scalo Publishers, New York 1995; Fred Abrahams/ Gilles Peress/ Eric Stower, *A Village Destroyed, May 14, 1999: War Crimes in Kosovo*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2001; Richard Misrach, *Bravo 20: The Bombing of the American West*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1990; Richard Misrach, *Violent Legacies: Three Cantos*, Cornerhouse Publications, Manchester 1992.
[6] Philip Jones Griffiths, *Vietnam Inc.*, Collier Books, New York 1971.

Kubrick, *Full Metal Jacket*, 1987

Both sides in the war were enemies of particular memories, as Norfolk reminds us with his picture of the remains of one of the Bamyian Buddhas, destroyed by the Taliban and seen through a ramshackle triumphal arch erected by the dubious allies of the US, the Northern Alliance. The vast apparatus of war that the US assembles by spending more on arms annually than the rest of the world put together, is an engine that takes its part in imposing certain stories on the world, while obliterating others. Carpet bombing, using weaponry developed during the Vietnam War, finds its analogue in the bombardment of spectacular mass culture, itself a corrosive agent deployed against resistant memory, history and meaning in an attempt to flatten the cultural scene into a landscape of homogeneous novelty and standardised variety. Whether, with all the contradictions that lie behind their smooth beauty, Norfolk's spectacular photographs can provide even a local and temporary antidote to such powerful forces of erasure is an open question.