



**KILLING FOR SHOW**  
Julian Stallabrass

Rowman & Littlefield  
978-1538-141-809  
€ 48

In 2008 Julian Stallabrass, writer, photographer, curator and professor of art history at the Courtauld Institute of Art curated a series of exhibitions for the Brighton Photo Biennial under the title: *Memory of Fire: Images of War and the War of Images*. He has now developed aspects of this work into a dense but accessible 325-page book.

*Killing for Show*, with over 200 images, is an ambitious work that attempts a synthesis of critiques of war from a wide range of disciplines: in his own words, 'the history and theory of media theory, military strategy, politics, visual culture and photography'. Its focus is the Vietnam and Iraq wars, the 'most media saturated' ever fought. The images include those taken by professional photographers, ordinary citizens, resistance groups, government propagandists and soldiers themselves. The context is the striking contrasts between the two wars. Vietnam was effectively a genocide in which millions were wiped out by carpet bombing and attacks on villages, whereas Iraq was about destroying the structure of society – apart from the oil industry.

In terms of imagery, photojournalists in Vietnam had the freedom to roam the battlefields and produce raw black and white images that filled the pages of the illustrated press, shifted public opinion and ultimately ended the war. The Americans learnt the lesson and in Iraq

imposed strict media management in which journalists and photographers were 'embedded' in troop units – a system designed to produce the coverage the government wanted.

But even in Iraq some photographers managed to make innovative and critical work. Stephanie Sinclair photographed civilians under occupation, a body of work that Stallabrass describes as 'one of the most remarkable photographic accounts of the war'. Geert van Kesteren used the phone images of Iraqi refugees in his book *Bagdad Calling*, along with his own. Farah Nosh took dignified portraits of Iraqis left with life changing injuries by military action. Eugenie Dolberg taught Iraqi women photography so that they could represent their own lives.

Another crucial difference between the two wars was the profound change in technology, with the advent of digital cameras, websites, blogs and satellite transmission. Stallabrass emphasises that speed of communication was a major factor. Images transmitted from Iraq reached picture desks around the world in seconds. The non-stop demand for media content meant that photographers tended to produce cliched images that suited editors – not to mention the US government and its military commanders.

Photojournalists, the military and news organisations collaborated to manufacture openly propagandistic images – the 'Shock and Awe' bombardment of Baghdad that launched the invasion in March 2003; the pulling down of the statue of Saddam Hussein in Firdos Square, Baghdad shortly afterwards; and the notorious 'Mission Accomplished' photograph of George W Bush aboard the aircraft carrier Abraham Lincoln. In response to this media management, an extraordinary proliferation of websites mushroomed to display soldiers' snapshots as the 'true face of war', with an anti-war message. Soldiers



Spread from *Killing for Show* showing photographs by Ghaith Abdul-Ahad (l) and Stephanie Sinclair (r).



Spread from *Killing for Show* showing photographs by Geert van Kesteren (l) and Ashley Gilbertson (r).

were invited to upload their grisly pictures – in one case in exchange for free access to pornography. Images of severed heads and limbs, gaping wounds and dismembered bodies were among the glut of shocking pictures.

For as long as it has been technically possible the sick and degrading process of war has been a subject for soldiers' cameras, but digitisation had created new possibilities for both taking them – for example helmet-cams on which soldiers could film themselves shooting and killing live – as well as displaying them.

The best-known soldiers' pictures to emerge from Iraq were taken at Abu Ghraib prison. They showed Iraqi prisoners being tortured, tormented and subjected to sexual humiliation, often with the perpetrators grinning alongside. These gruesome soldiers' images were the tip of an iceberg. Stallabrass describes in chilling detail how in both wars photography was used as an instrument of torture with examples that make for harrowing reading. One prisoner at Guantanamo 'was repeatedly shown photographs of scantily dressed women along with images of 9/11, particularly of children who had died that day. The images were taped to his body, and to ensure that he had paid them close attention, he was ordered to answer questions about them. If he failed to comply, he would suffer punishment'.

This entanglement of all these types of violent images in high-speed media fed into popular and military gaming culture, with soldiers saying their experiences of war was like being in a movie or video game. With the Vietnam War the dominant medium was largely the big-screen movie. Stallabrass discusses the 'puzzle' that while Vietnam offered a striking number of iconic images such as Nik Ut's picture of the napalmed children running along a highway and Eddie Adams photograph of the

street execution of a Vietnam prisoner, Iraq yielded few – apart from Abu Ghraib. For Stallabrass the iconic image had become a victim of the rapidity of communication and the general decline in authority and public confidence in the truth of images. For him 'the greatest test for memory and the iconic image is surely 9/11 that most brilliant of photo-ops, staged in the most media saturated city on earth'. Yet Americans still saw 9/11 as an atrocity unconnected with their history of making wars which, since 1945, have claimed more than 6 million civilian lives. Stallabrass writes: 'The combination of a firm belief in its own sanctity and the justice of its violence makes the US a uniquely dangerous and deadly power'.

In the main Stallabrass does what he sets out to do: to show how images are woven into the very fabric of war and the institutions that support it – though the book's complicated structure does lend itself to repetitive passages. Perhaps surprisingly he offers an optimistic vision for a future without war, with action in favour of meaningful democracy and prosecution for crimes committed by the security state, though he questions whether images can indeed function 'democratically and collectively'. President Biden has pulled the last troops out of Afghanistan and called a halt to the US warmongering launched 20 years ago by George W Bush, following 9/11, at a cost of \$21 trillion. Could it be that Julian Stallabrass's vision is more than wishful thinking?

— Janina Struk