

The Look of War

Julian Stallabrass

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Ahmad Al-Rubaye, Iraqi youths throw stones at British soldiers as clashes broke out in the southern city of Basra, 9 August 2003, over fuel shortages and lack of electricity. Soldiers fired rubber bullets wounding four people, including a child, according to witnesses. AFP Photo

The look of war in photojournalism results from the collision of ingrained aesthetic and technical skills with the particular circumstances of the battle zone. When experienced photographers with distinct styles meet these novel situations, the balance between them may shift from one pole to the other—from embodied habit to the imposition of the new. While much war photography is strongly generic, with familiar subjects being repeated across otherwise very different conflicts, there are a few photographers with elaborate signature styles who manage to make images that seem authored. For example, James Nachtwey, famed for his finely composed, dark and expressive black-and-white work, made photographs that always looked like Nachtweys, whether in Rwanda or Bosnia. Yet circumstances also have their say: in the 2003 Iraq War, no matter how much certain photographers strove for the look—and the political

effect—of war photography in Vietnam, the degraded urban landscape (the nation, remember, had been strangled with severe sanctions for a decade before the war began), the arid climate and dull light imposed very different results. As one photojournalist, Ashley Gilbertson complained, ‘Iraq was just a flat, ugly, Middle Eastern country with a shitload of oil.’¹

In Iraq, the look of war photography was also forged by the extensive manipulations of the US armed forces who were ordered to produce specific and indeed scripted photo-ops, by the demands of the Western media for positive and saleable news stories, and eventually by the growing hostility of Iraqis to the invaders and their media alike, which made it extremely perilous to make photographs or video. For all but the bravest and most dedicated photographers, often locals (such as Ghaith Abdul Ahad, Ahmad Al-Rubaye or Wathiq Khuzai), such circumstances produced images that combined conventional compositional effects with clichéd subjects. While some photojournalists in Iraq made remarkable images, those who departed from the aesthetic and political line found it difficult or impossible to sell them.

In the years since, various connected pressures have borne down hard on professional war photography: first, phone photography has become so widespread and so deskilled that it allows almost anyone to take passably publishable images. This development has been accompanied by a great rise in scepticism about photographic truth—much of it justified since social media images are regularly falsified. In one sense what the professional photojournalist offers is an institutional assurance that the image will not be manipulated to misrepresent events, and will not be misattributed. This is hardly enough to satisfy the sceptics who rightly say that manipulation also occurs in the selection and juxtaposition of subjects, in framing and in stylistic choices, and also because states have such vast and well-funded propaganda programmes. This pervasive scepticism partly account for the straightforward evidentiary style of most war photography as it seeks to convince viewers of its veracity. The controversial fashion for applying Instagram filters to conflict photography was consequently short-lived.

Second, making a living as a photojournalist has become ever more difficult as the printed press continues to decline, and as resources devoted to serious news coverage, particularly foreign affairs, continue to shrink. As charities and NGOs supply photographers with more work, the default position has become a revamped and sometimes vapid humanism—a world of victims who, while thrust into intolerable and intractable circumstances in the grossly unequal world order, must be accorded dignity, at least photographically. This usually means a focus on portraits of individuals or families who show apparent fortitude, their faces often lit chiaroscuro-style, using available light or less often flash, picked out from subdued backgrounds. This is already a cliché of the Ukraine war, as of many others.

¹ Gilbertson interviewed in Michael Kamber, *Photojournalists on War: The Untold Stories from Iraq*, University of Texas Press, Austin 2013, p. 78.

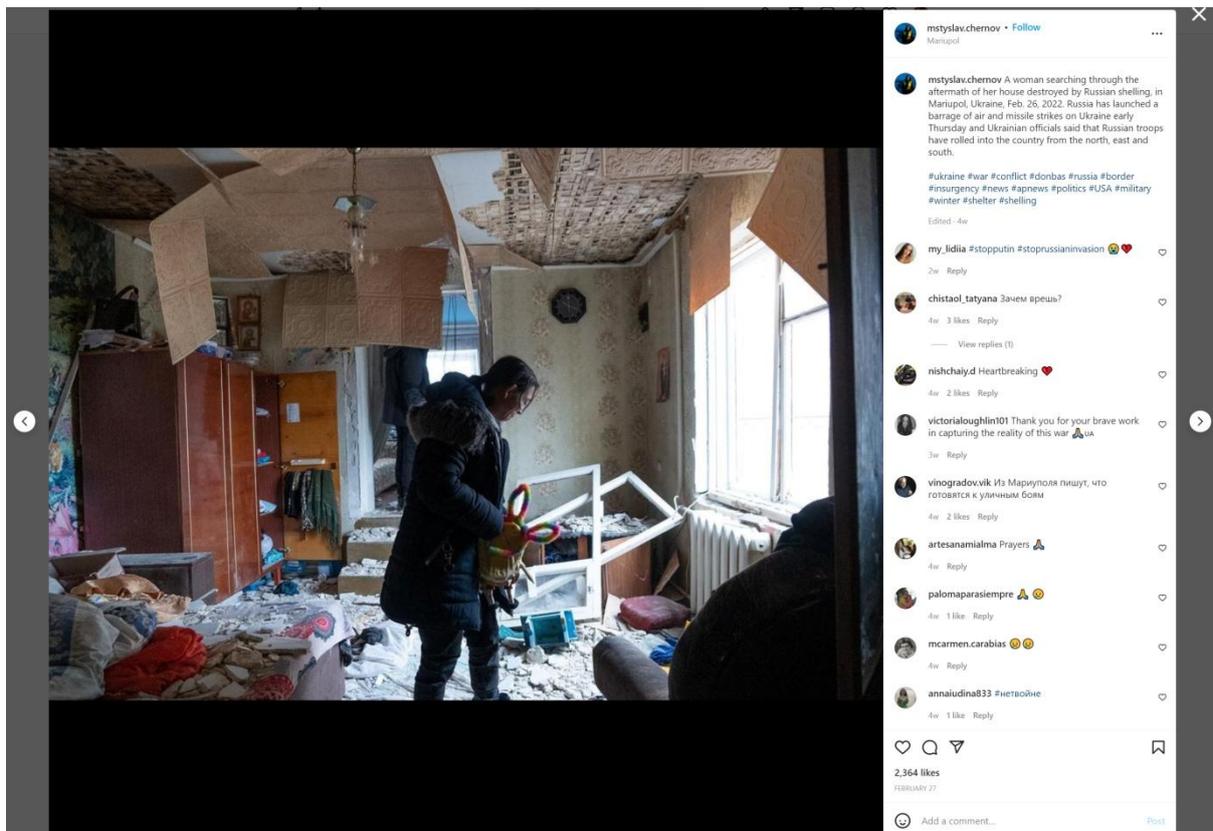


March 25: Maria Rushchshyn and Maria Pysco (L-R) take cover in a bomb shelter after air raid sirens sounded in Lviv, Ukraine.
Joe Raedts/Getty Images

Third, that war itself has long been changing towards smaller, long-term civil conflicts in which civilians are the main victims, being a resource to be exploited and traded with politically. The main exception, the gigantic media war in Iraq, went badly awry as the manufactured heroics of the invasion gave way to the beleaguered occupation, and to terrible sectarian warfare which was encouraged by the invaders to weaken the resistance. The civil conflicts since—in Libya, Syria, Yemen and the Democratic Republic of the Congo—sustained by the proxy forces of larger powers, have seemed interminable, dreary, obscure and without obvious heroes (if not villains). As such, the images they generate are little marketable in the Western media. Since the deep hostility to that media first seen in Iraq has persisted, they are also very dangerous to cover, and it is frequently left to local amateurs to make images, which often subsequently fall into the abyss of photographic scepticism.

In all ways, then, the conflict in Ukraine came as a bolt from the blue: a European nation invaded by a huge conventional army, and by a power that did not admit that it was at war, so limiting its media operations to dissimulation, denial and repression. Heroes and villains apparently abound, and a sophisticated media-attuned populace clearly see that images are of use to them, and collaborate with their makers. As a result, the conflict has seen an influx of well-known photojournalists including Lynsey Addario, Ron Haviv, Chris McGrath and Aris Messinis, who work alongside locals such as Mstyslav Chernov and Mikhail Palinchak, and photographers from the wider region. What are the results?

The novel features are to do with the sheer scale of the war as photographs show bombing and missile attacks, armoured warfare (destroyed tanks, long columns of vehicles, sometimes Russian-backed militia in their armour) and the devastation of cities. Beyond this, much seems familiar, both in terms of subject matter and photographic address—from the conflicts over the break-up of Yugoslavia and the NATO bombings there, to Chechnya and, of course, the conflict in Crimea. Troops do what they always have, people shelter underground or pick through the ruins of their homes, vulnerable refugees flee with the aid of soldiers (and, in a sub-genre, look out of the windows of buses and trains), mourners are photographed at funerals, the wounded are seen in hospitals, cultural monuments and religious buildings are under threat or damaged. Many of these images, it should be stressed, are taken in dangerous circumstances with great skill, and in them one can often register their subjects' active collaboration.

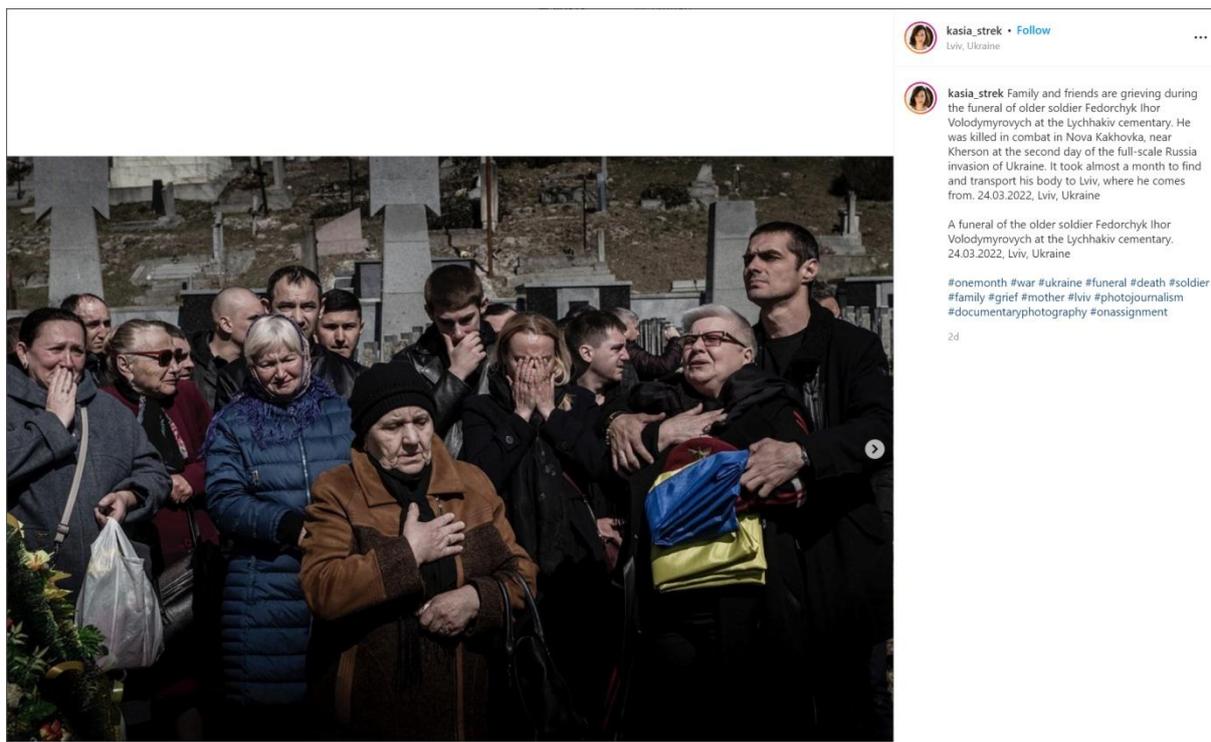


Mstyslav Chernov, A woman searching through her house, destroyed by Russian shelling in Mariupol, 26 February 2022.

Despite their generic character, these photographs are, of course, extremely disturbing. They do what photographs always do well: to assert the presence of individuals in this place, at this time, and in this particular plight. The flow of such images across print and more often websites and social media elicit above all an emotional response, as can readily be seen from the majority of the comments on Instagram and other platforms.

Some have remarked upon the power of the professional images coming out of Ukraine, in marked contrast to previous conflicts, including arguably the war in Iraq. This is partly to do with the attitude of the subjects, as we have seen, but also the prospect of getting published. Of the photographers who have travelled to Ukraine, Lynsey Addario is among the best-known for

her skilful orchestration of high colour images, especially of people in war zones, in which she pays close attention to women. One of her photographs from Ukraine—which is in no way recognisable as being in the Addario signature style—caused controversy for showing the corpses of a mother and her two children, slaughtered by a mortar shell. It was published on the front page of the *New York Times*, and rightly so, as a small indication of the costs of the war and the targeting of civilians. She later photographed the father, holding up framed portraits of the loved ones he had lost. For those who remember the mainstream media treatment of the Iraq War, however, these images can only bring to mind how rarely Iraqi civilians received the same treatment, let alone had their names appear and their life stories told.



Kasia Strek, funeral of Fedorchyk Ihor Volodmyrovych, Lviv, March 2022

Such photojournalism co-exists with a torrent of remarkable amateur images and video across social media, sometimes from places where the professional media cannot enter: missiles and shells slamming into buildings, tanks running over civilian vehicles, destroyed Russian supply and armoured columns, the dead (including charred corpses from the massacre at Bucha), and moving images of wounded civilians. These are often of a much more graphic nature than will appear in the press.

At the same time, and in marked contrast to the divide between amateur and professional images in older conflicts, many of these images taken by ordinary people on camera phone, look somewhat like photojournalism. The most notorious amateur images shot in Iraq—at least in the West—those taken in Abu Ghraib were shot on cheap digital cameras, and are of very poor resolution, with dull colours and much grain, due to the low light of the prison interior. Now phone images, even those shot in very challenging conditions, exhibit a professional sheen.

Digital photographs, especially when shot on phones, have moved away from being a singular emulation of the film image towards a heavily processed piece of computational photography, governed by machine learning schooled on the vast databases of online photography.

The iPhone has gone furthest down this path. Apple is secretive about the details of its photographic processing but we do know that a rolling buffer of shots continues to be taken as soon as a user starts to operate the camera, and that around the moment chosen when the photo is 'taken', many images are selected, compared pixel by pixel, and merged to give HDR effects, correct colour casts, blur out noise, brighten facial features and enhance skies. Images are analysed on the fly, especially to pick out human features, but also to apply different amounts of noise reduction to different areas. This takes a lot of processing power working at high speed, so each individual image is of quite low resolution and taken at a rapid shutter speed. The phone's various lenses are switched between without the interaction of the user, giving the feel of a seamless zoom between ultra-wide and telephoto.

These processing effects produce a smooth 'photographic surface', and sometimes produce strangely painterly effects, especially in low light. Some critics have complained about the results on the latest and most sophisticated iPhones. In a piece for *The New Yorker*, Kyle Chayka writes of the uncanny effects which are 'coldly crisp and vaguely inhuman':

The resulting iPhone images have a destabilizing effect on the status of the camera and the photographer, creating a shallow copy of photographic technique that undermines the impact of the original. The average iPhone photo strains toward the appearance of professionalism and mimics artistry without ever getting there.²

There is a paradoxical tussle here of a reality effect with overt falsity. So in terms of the aesthetics of much amateur photography on social media, we have the imposition of a corporate view of what photography should look like, and indeed an emulation of professionalism. These apparently straightforward artefacts are then thrown into the social media environment.

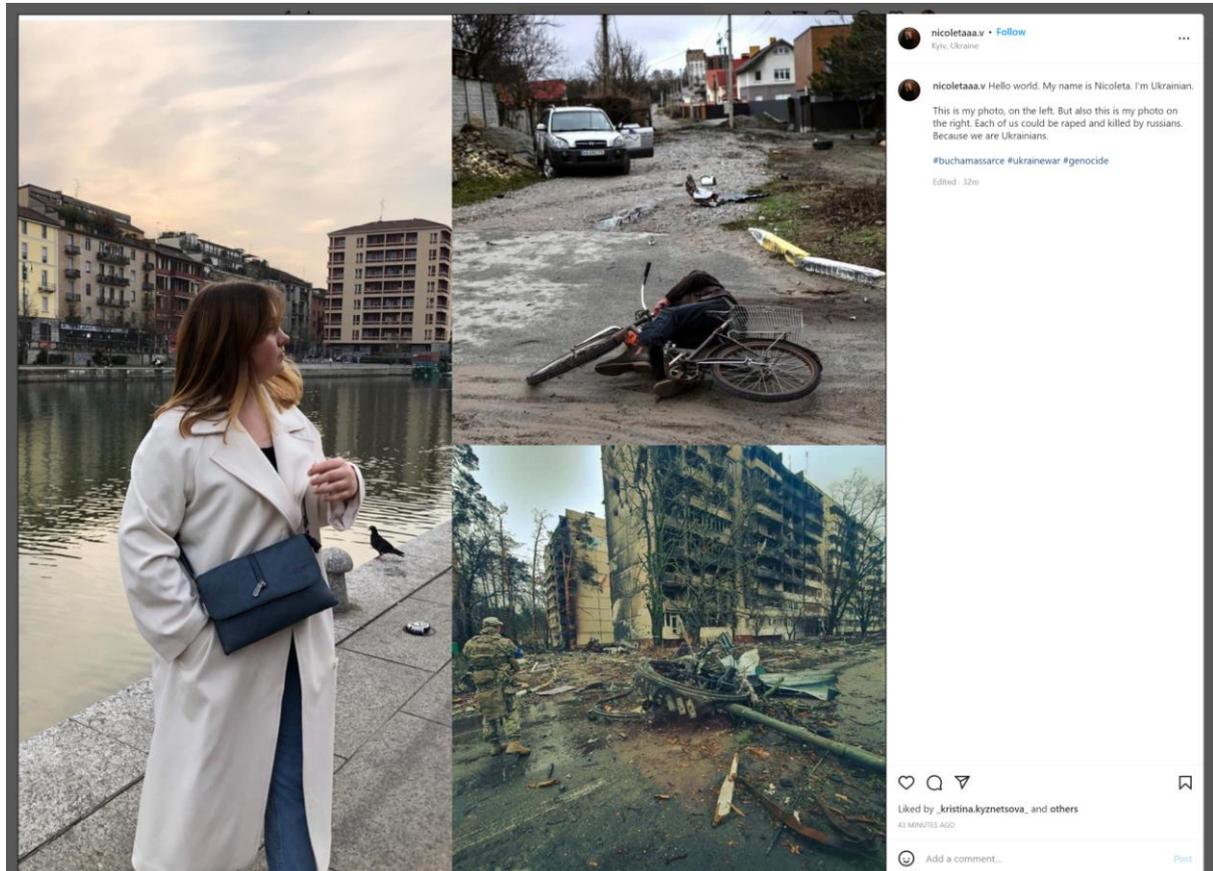
This is not to say that on social media there is no difference between professional photojournalism and amateur imagery of warfare in Ukraine, just that sometimes the distance between them has shrunk. Social media feeds show a prevalence of video, a mix of 'poor' and high gloss images, and many images of a performative character, in which the drama of witnessing and showing to a viewership is dramatised.³ Most of those made by Ukrainians have an explicit political message: not just to condemn the actions of Russian troops but to call for greater military assistance.

In professional and amateur images alike, the generic character of war photography asserts itself, and the vast and rapid flow of photographic images is used to bolster the political viewpoint of the US and the NATO countries, which of course say that the only legitimate use of force is their own. The agency of the individuals who take photographs and appear in them is weak, subservient to these larger structures of power and propaganda. Among those is that of the social media monopolies: what does the stream of war images mean to them? Merely another

² Kyle Chayka, 'Have iPhone Cameras Become Too Smart?', *The New Yorker*, 18 March 2022.

³ On poor images, see Hito Steyerl, 'In Defense of the Poor Image', *e-flux*, no. 10, 2009.

form of highly charged emotional content, which can be used to stimulate viewers to greater outrage and deeper engagement, thus tying their attention more firmly to adverts. It is incredible that this vast and sophisticated apparatus of connection and manipulation is merely used to get people to buy more stuff. The monopolies are, as we know, careless of any side-effects, from widespread mental illness to violent civil strife. The march to wider war may be just another.



Nicolettaav, Instagram before and after comparison showing war damage.

There have been some critical analyses of the long and complex series of events that led to the war, and of the balance of political forces on either side.⁴ They tend to see the conflict in less Manichean terms than the mainstream media, while still condemning the barbarity of the Russian invasion, and try to think out the prospects for a peaceful settlement and the dangers of a prolonged and escalating war.

In previous conflicts, to get behind these appearances to the causes as well as the overall conduct of the war, photojournalists have had to adapt to a conflict's specific character: to understand the complexities of the situation, and the aims and tactics of the participants, including their propaganda efforts. To make such work in Ukraine would mean taking images of Ukrainians in which they are not merely seen as brave resistance fighters and war victims, but as active agents with diverse views and aims. It might, for instance, lead a photographer to ask questions about the integration of the neo-Nazi Azov Battalion into the Ukrainian army. Such analytical

⁴ See, for example, Tony Wood's forthcoming editorial essay in *New Left Review*, nos. 133/134, January- April 2022.

photographic work—for instance by Philip Jones Griffiths and Bunyo Ishikawa in Vietnam, or Susan Meiselas in Nicaragua, or Gilles Peress in Bosnia, or Ghaith Abdul Ahad in Iraq—is rare, and usually the product of years of arduous work. It is to be hoped that the war in Ukraine will end before that adaptation can take place.