

Interview between Julian Stallabrass and Erika Zerwes about Images of War and the War of Images

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EZ: I was thinking about how in your book *Killing for Show* you analyse the relations between photographic technologies and warfare technologies, that were available first in Vietnam and then in Iraq. I guess that these relations are one of the main aspects of war's photographic history, and examples of how the photographers were caught between them during the American Civil War, the First World War and the Spanish Civil War come to mind as predecessors of the highly technological era opened by the Vietnam War. Could you please talk a little bit about how these relations between image and warfare technologies impacted or are manifested in the photographs that we, as observers, received since Vietnam, and if you think it caused great changes in the messages the photographs convey?

JS: The differences are, of course, profound. In the Vietnam War, cameras were largely clockwork optical devices which took a good deal of skill to operate, especially in uncontrolled and dangerous conditions; newspaper images were sent over radio station networks when they were not broadcasting at night, and could be disrupted by weather (or in South Vietnam, government censorship), and the process was so slow that only a few images could be sent each day; the US military did use computers for data analysis but they were staffed by highly trained operatives and filled entire rooms. So the scene today is in some ways unrecognisable: that everyone (almost) has cameras built into their communication devices and can take and send as many images as they want; that those cameras automate and intervene in the image-taking and image-making processes; that the war machine itself is thoroughly saturated with computerisation, and is dedicated to the manipulation of communications, whether it emanates from the battlefield, the media or from ordinary people.

The so-called 'Revolution in Military Affairs' was first put into practice in Afghanistan and Iraq in 2002-3, and was the ambition to thoroughly integrate military operations with the gathering, transmission and analysis of data, including the domination of the media to manufacture good publicity and intimidate the enemy. This did change the images made and seen because some military operations were laid on specifically for the media: the clearest demonstration of this was the gigantic photo-op with which the Iraq War opened: the 'Shock and Awe' bombing and missile attack on Baghdad. On the night of 21-22 March 2003, bombers and cruise missiles targeted government buildings in a spectacular attack, staged for the representatives of the world media. Journalists were gathered in the high-rise Palestine Hotel with a clear view of the opposite bank of the Tigris on which many state buildings were concentrated. Before their lenses, US

forces showed the destruction that they could bring down on a chosen enemy, in a extravagant, fiery display, hitting 1,000 targets with bombs, and another 600 with cruise missiles. The idea was to discourage enemy forces—and it had just that effect.



Franco Pagetti, Iraqi Government buildings on the bank of the Tigris River attacked by US missiles and bombs, Baghdad, 21 March 2003.

Well, that's one side of it. Another, though, is that war photographs have long had a strongly generic character, and that there are aspects of army life, or what weapons do to buildings, or how civilians act under bombardment or seek to flee from it, or what the wounded and dead look like, or how soldiers when they pose with guns, which change little. We see this in many of the images coming out of the war in Ukraine, which have a ghastly familiarity, even though they are taken by digital cameras and phones, transmitted near-instantly and are rapidly forced into various propaganda operations. Some of that familiarity may be deceptive, as in the photojournalists who sought out echoes of Vietnam in the very different circumstances of Iraq, as visual similarity masks profound differences in photographic technology, military operations, politics and social circumstances. Part of what I try to do in the book is to elucidate those circumstances and pry the images loose of genre and into their own particularity.

EZ: This is an interesting point, when photographers have other images as visual references. In this sense, another very interesting aspect of the relation between visibility and technology that you point to in the book is that not only war images inspired and helped to shape movies and video games (in the case of Iraq), but the other way around. Movies and video games also had a part in shaping war. It made me think about the dialectical concept of visual culture defended by authors such as WJT Mitchell, when he says that there is a social construction of visibility, but

also a visual construction of the social field. How can we articulate the notion of ‘killing for show’ with this two-way path?



RAF air strike on ISIS vehicle at Al Qaim, north-west of Baghdad, Iraq, November 2014. Vehicle destroyed with single Brimstone missile video.

JS: I use the phrase ‘killing for show’ to describe how those who use lethal force make images of their actions, or cause them to be made, and how they turn them to propaganda and military purposes. One of my first examples is an RAF video of a very expensive ‘smart’ missile blowing up a pick-up truck in Iraq in 2014: this was staged primarily so that the UK government (following the ignominious defeat of its ground forces) could pretend that it taking effective action by creating a high-budget snuff movie.

The two-way path that you talk about is, I think, a lot more two-way than it used to be, although the effect was always there. John Wayne’s fabrication of Second World War heroism was carried around in the heads of many US soldiers in Vietnam, and influenced their behaviour—especially when cameras were around—sometimes with fatal consequences to the actor. As more and more people gain knowledge about media—as producers, not just consumers—the effect is greatly reinforced. In the Libyan conflict, for example, the actions of many fighters are puzzling at first sight: rebels stood in the open street wildly firing off automatic rounds in the general direction of government forces. This may have been due to a lack of military training, but it was also a knowing performance for the cameras, which drew on Hollywood cliché and the photographic images of what wars should look like. They meant to create images that would be seen at home and abroad, almost immediately. Given that the rebels’ survival hung on foreign intervention, it was worth the mortal risk to help make such images—agents of war more effective than bullets.

This is something that Ariella Azoulay in her work, especially *The Civil Contract of Photography*, gets at so brilliantly: that subjects knowingly assert their rights through performance in images.

EZ: Does it blur, in a sense, the lines dividing reality and fiction or is it a more sophisticated play with Western traditions of visual representation?

JS: It is not just sophistication about images that has fed the effect. While documentary images were fed back to their more privileged subjects quite quickly through newspapers, magazines and TV, the influential narratives of cinema were another matter. It took a good decade from the height of US involvement in the Vietnam War for the ethos and the look of the conflict's photojournalism to find its fictional place in film. Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) took its colours from Larry Burrows and Tim Page, along with a joy in hi-tech weaponry. The helicopter assault on a village, to the blaring of Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyries* (an appropriate tinge of fascism), is still a pre-mission favourite to fill troops with blood lust. Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) drew on the darker vision of Philip Jones Griffiths' *Vietnam Inc.*, not just for its look but for an overall vision of a war fought to force consumerism on a remote and alien culture: the final scene shows US troops marching through the devastation that they have caused, singing about Mickey Mouse. Already in Iraq, troops could play games that approximated the war scenario and environment; and by 2008 could see the HBO TV series, *Generation Kill*, based on embedded journalism by Evan Wright, and using ex-Marines among its cast. Since the US command was also ordering its troops to create congenial photo-ops for the media, and was scripting its operations to make Hollywood style narratives (such as the 'rescue' of Jessica Lynch from the Iraqis who were tending her wounds), the effect becomes even stronger. In all of this, there is a rapid cycling of material from photojournalism, TV, films and games to render an intensely naturalistic and ideologically false view of the war.



Still from *Generation Kill*, HBO TV series, 2008

Yet it is important to add that this Baudrillard-like hall of mirrors was not immune to the realities of opposition and contingency. ‘Heroic’ and photogenic operations were hobbled by continual harassing attacks and IEDs. US troops were increasingly imprisoned in their bases and armoured vehicles; Western photojournalism was driven from the streets by a hostile populace; and above all Iraqi politics, of which this realm was largely and wilfully ignorant, defined the course of events in ways that exceeded the power of the occupiers, and their attempts to forge reality in the shape of their representations.

EZ: In the way you just described it, the notion of ‘killing for show’ presupposes the perpetrator’s point of view and the narratives it creates. In the book you show how in recent decades these narratives are specially marked by neoliberalism, placing profit before credible information. Yet the book also appears to believe in photography’s capacity to promote change. How do you think this can happen? And what would be the role of the individual photographer? What are the limits to his or her agency?



Horst Faas, A father holds the body of his child as South Vietnamese Army Rangers look down from their armoured vehicle. The child was killed as government forces pursued guerrillas into a village near the Cambodian border, 19 March 1964.

JS: Yes, ‘killing for show’ is a tactic of the perpetrators—of states, above all, but also of all those who wield violence for political effect, including terrorist groups. And yes, part of what the book does is to show how neoliberalism affects the media, politics and also the military, and tended to lessen the possibilities for resistance, and for making and publishing images that would run

counter to the orthodoxy. Yet I hope that I am careful not to romanticise the Vietnam War era: we should remember that most of the US media for most of the conflict was fully supportive of the war, and even of the strategy to destroy the peasantry—of a genocide. Also that the anti-war movement in the US failed: the US armed forces were driven out by their inability to win, and the vast costs of its war effort, not by public opinion. Nixon was elected and re-elected with the aim of wreaking maximum destruction by bombing, and gradually handing over the war to the South Vietnamese. The effects of photojournalism and the media coverage generally were hugely divisive in the US, and split society down the middle, and we should not forget that, but in the end the anti-war movement failed. When we read Sontag's *On Photography*, and her mordant words on the politically powerless but addictive effects of images of horror, that is the context we should have in mind.

Equally, the neoliberal war did not exactly go to plan. The war on Iraq, thought Donald Rumsfeld, would be a quick, cheap conflict because of the use of digital systems and high-tech weaponry—one that the US could apply over and over to keep other rogue states in line. As we know, it spiralled into a situation in which US and UK forces were the hated policemen of a grotesque failed state, in which they had to fuel sectarian warfare so that Iraqis would fight each other and put less pressure on the occupation, and in which the powers-that-be were so incompetent and corrupt that many billions of dollars of development money evaporated without any improvement in the basic services necessary to life and health. More than that, 'killing for show', always a risky stratagem, is more so in a digital age: images circulate outside of official circuits, are repurposed, recaptioned, re-edited, and turned to all kinds of uses. What is first read as a virtuous exercise of power may later be read as evidence of an atrocity. The book is a plea—and a demonstration, I hope—that photographic images may be read in detail to activate their latent resistant and counter-hegemonic potential. That is even true of photographs that were made by the perpetrators.

EZ: Still thinking about this idea of a wider narrative that photos should be in line with, when I was reading your book I couldn't help making parallels with the unfolding war in Ukraine. It is possible to see that many actions that Putin is taking now, which led US president Biden to call him a war criminal (such as the deliberate targeting of civilians, use of weapons banned by international agreements, persecution of journalists), were all used by the US in the wars they waged. How do you see the differences in the visual representation of a war when the aggressor is on the other side of the narrative?

JS: Since the catastrophe in Iraq, wars have generally settled back into their pattern of smaller, long-term civil conflicts in which civilians are the main victims, being a resource to be exploited and traded with politically. In Libya, Syria, Yemen and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, for example, wars sustained by the proxy forces of larger powers, have seemed interminable, obscure and without obvious heroes (if not villains). Often the images they generate are little marketable in the Western media.

So the conflict in Ukraine came as a bolt from the blue: a European nation invaded by a huge conventional army. There are parallels with Iraq since the war is not sanctioned by the UN, and indeed because hideous weapons including cluster bombs, thermobaric munitions and white phosphorus were used in built-up areas. There are two huge differences, though: first that while

in Iraq the populace turned against the media which were seen as willing propagandists for the occupiers, in Ukraine a sophisticated media-attuned populace clearly see that images are of use to them, and sympathetically 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. Second, that since Russia barely admits that it is fighting a war, its propaganda is largely limited to dissimulation and repression. Faced with images of widespread destruction and massacre, or of the bombing of the maternity hospital in Mariupol, it is reduced to claiming that the images are fakes.



Aris Messinis, A woman holds a dog in a train at a metro station used as a bomb shelter, Kharkiv 2022.

Many of the professional images made in Ukraine focus on the plight of civilians and do so from a simple humanitarian perspective. 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. 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 circumstance. 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. The danger is perhaps that all this slips into the gestural politics of NGO-humanism: a world of victims who, while thrust into intolerable and intractable situations in the grossly unequal world order, must be accorded dignity, if only photographically. And this as certain politicians, such as Gordon Brown, who ran the finances of

the last Labour government and was thus deeply implicated in the war on Iraq, call for Putin to be tried for war crimes. As many people have pointed out, it seems some victims are worthier than others.

EZ: When you say that photographs can change meaning (from a virtuous exercise of power to evidence of an atrocity for example) it makes clear that the book's premise escapes from the usual way that war photography is presented, centred on the notion of the photographer as author. So the photographer's agency is only one aspect involved in the interpretation of his or her work.

And of course, the notion of authorship weakens as we move further into the social media age, with millions of anonymous people producing and sharing images.

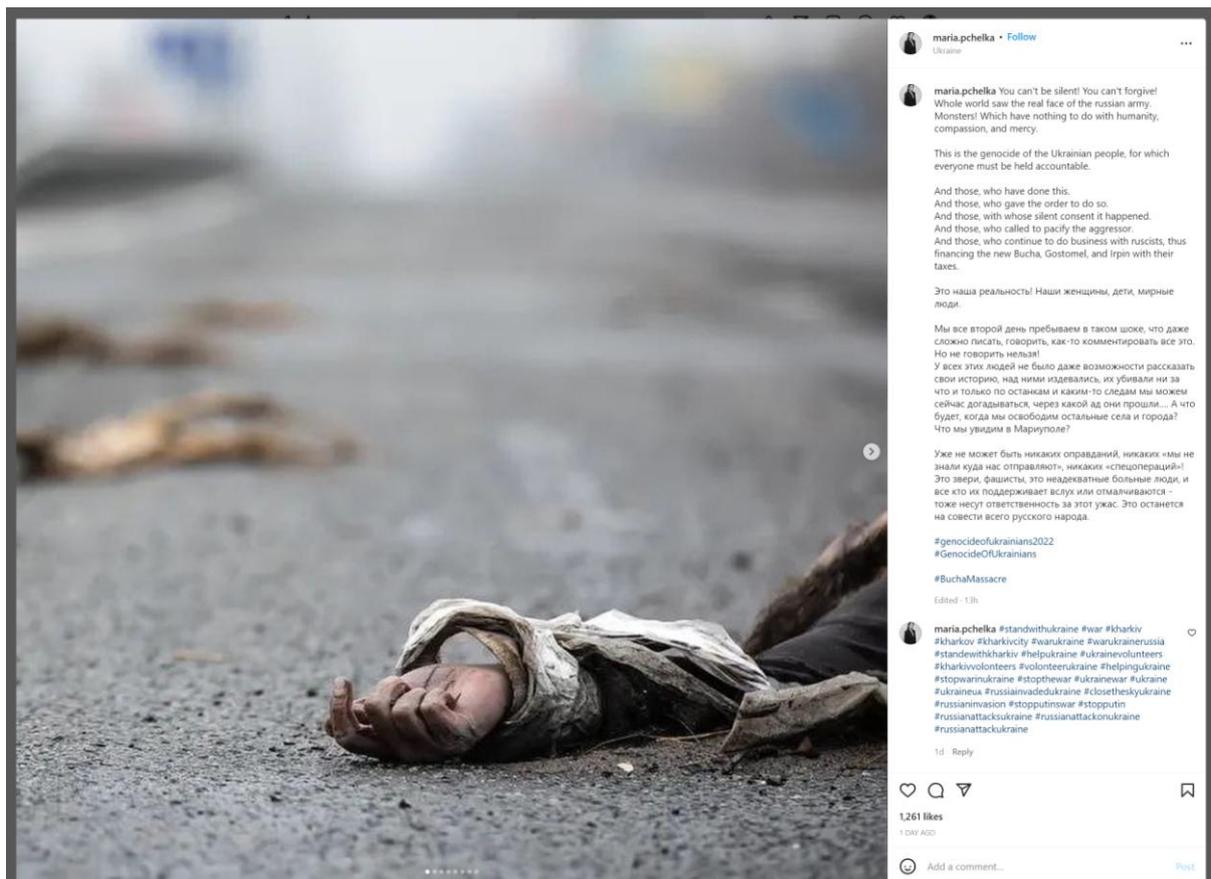
Some people have been naming the Ukrainian war as the 'first TikTok war'. I think it is clear that social media do not substitute professional war coverage, but I wonder what kind of impact it causes. What I mean is that I wonder if the internal policies of what can be shared in the big social media firms can add yet another layer to the many aspects involved in the interpretation of photographs that escape the photographer's agency.

JS: I have mentioned Azoulay before, and one of the things that I find very useful in her work is the way she sees the photographic author as part of a network which also comprises subjects, photographic technology, editors and publishers and of course viewers. Power relations structure the network in various ways, not always to the advantage of the author—certainly not in the industry of photojournalism. Sometimes, Azoulay downplays those power relations, and there are certainly circumstances which are a hard test for her assertion of citizenship rights through photography—as in rural Vietnam, where the power relations between troops, journalists and peasants were grotesquely unequal, and where many peasants had little knowledge of what photographs could do. But the 'TikTok war' is an ideal case: a sophisticated, media-attuned public make and assert their claims in photographs and video, while under assault from a power that is using the violation of their rights—and their very lives—as leverage to its geopolitical advantage.

Such images are unowned, as Azoulay says: copied, re-edited, re-captioned and re-distributed across multiple platforms. It makes them subject to much scepticism, which is often justified, since social media images are often faked or misattributed, and all major nations have well-funded propaganda, psyops and black propaganda arms. Then, of course, the Russian tactics of throwing into the media atmosphere vast quantities of chaff—distracting, contradictory claims—seems to be effective, at least in Russia itself. In a lot of the conflicts following Iraq, since the deep hostility to that media first seen there has persisted and they are very dangerous to cover, it is frequently left to local amateurs to make images, and those often fall into the abyss of photographic scepticism.

Ukraine is so unusual because you have the 'TikTok war' and many professional photojournalists working together, and the social media feeds barely distinguish between the two. In one sense what the 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. There are well-known ‘authors’, such as Lynsey Addario, working in the Ukraine war, and they bring their personal authority to the reception of their images. And there are others in the making such as Ukrainian photojournalists Mstyslav Chernov and Evgeniy Maloletka who made remarkable work in very perilous circumstances in Mariupol. Yet the generic character of war photography also asserts itself, and the wide 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. So it is clear that the agency of photographic authors and of those who appear in their images is subject to these larger structures of power and propaganda.



Among those, as you say, is that of the social media monopolies: what does the flow of war images mean to them? Merely another form of highly charged emotional content, which can be used to stimulate viewers to greater outrage and deeper engagement, so as to tie their attention to adverts. It is incredible that this vast and sophisticated apparatus of connection and manipulation is turned merely to the purpose of getting 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 might be merely another one.

