

'War/ Photography: Images of Armed Conflict and its Aftermath' Review

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'War/ Photography: Images of Armed Conflict and its Aftermath' [exhibition review of Anne Wilkes Tucker and Will Michels, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 2012], *Photography & Culture*, vol. 7, no. 2, July 2014, pp. 223-28.



War/Photography is the catalogue of a major touring exhibition from the Houston Museum of Fine Arts, currently crossing the US. It is a massive publication, over a foot high and 600 pages long, and contains nearly 500 beautifully reproduced plates. There is also a great deal of text, which include some well-researched essays, particularly those on the technology of taking and transmitting images by Natalie Zeltz; on the use of German First World War snapshots by Bobo Von Dewitz, and on troops' photography in Iraq by Liam Kennedy. Reflecting the curators' and authors' ambitions to explore a range of war photography much wider than that made by photojournalists, many of the illustrations do more than merely reproduce the photographic image: albums, posters, casings, books and stereographs are illustrated, along with some of the technology that made and transmitted them. There is even a doll of an Iwo Jima Marine in his box, which also carries a little facsimile of *Life* magazine; and the 'Iraqi Most Wanted' playing cards issued to US troops during the 2003 invasion. While celebrated photographs get an outing, many of the illustrations are little known, and the book, with its wide temporal and geographical

span, careful selection of striking images, and care to reproduce their visual context, provides a remarkable and valuable resource.

Aside from the attention paid to a wide range of imagery—including photographs made by the military for surveillance and propaganda purposes, and personal pictures made by soldiers, memorial photographs and occasionally artists' interventions—one of the core aims of the project is, as the lead curator Anne Wilkes Tucker writes, to resituate this material 'particularly in relation to military perspectives and priorities' (Tucker 2012: 7). Some of her collaborators who have had a great deal of influence in interpreting the images in the exhibition and book, are closely associated with the military: they include Hilary Roberts, the head curator of the photographic collection at the Imperial War Museum, and Jeffrey Hunt, director of the Texas Military Forces Museum. One of the intentions, as stated by curator Will Michels, is to bring together two sets of people who look closely at war photographs: the aesthetes who examine them for their formal qualities, and the military enthusiasts who look to them for evidence about tactics, insignia, weaponry and other equipment (385).

The book closely reflects the organisation of the show, which is divided into genres which draw together photographs from many different conflicts from the Crimean War to the present. As Tucker lists them, these genres include: the 'advent of war', recruitment, embarkation, training, battle and its aftermath, including deaths, grief, 'property damage' (a wonderfully capitalist description, this), medical care, prisoners and executions; portraits were interspersed in the show and have their own section in the book (3). Rightly, the selection does not shy away from explicit and disturbing images of killing, the dead, the wounded and the maimed, and those who grieve.

It is probable, though not explicitly stated, that the organisation by genre is intended to bring the two audiences together on common ground: that genre is a comforting prop for art world viewers, and that the genres of war photography are also readily understood by those with knowledge of the military. In show and book, historical similarities (and less often) contrasts are drawn over time. Photographers and soldiers are seen as performing for one another in similar ways in many different conflicts; the use soldiers make of photography is quite constant, at least when it is available to them as a consumer technology; and troops getting on a boat to go to war look pretty much the same in 1890 and 1990.

There are some advantages to the focus on genre: for a start, it opens up the question of why some genres are so durable. Military photographers have long been keen to make pictures of occupying troops playing with, aiding and giving gifts to children; we can find many such photographs taken by US Army personnel in the Second World War, Korea, Vietnam and Iraq, and they do not change very much. Moreover, many professional photojournalists (particularly the duller and more ambitious sort) consciously attempt to remake the pictorial triumphs of earlier wars, rather than seek out the particular character of the latest conflict. Yet little of this is explored in the catalogue text. Tucker's essays, which open each generic section, string anodyne sentences between descriptions of one image and another, often with forced associations and contrasts. The method yields some odd and perturbing passages.



For instance, of an acute picture by Anja Niedringhaus of a soldier entering Fallujah in the November 2004 offensive with an Action Man sticking out of the top of his pack, Tucker writes: ‘the charm of this image belies the fact that this marine is participating in the bloodiest battle of the Iraq War [...]’ (125). While accepting that some of the troops sent into this battle were little more than kids, the reader may find it less than charming that this soldier enters a city full of civilians accompanied by violent childhood fantasies—and we know something of the lethal results of such attitudes for Fallujah’s inhabitants.



Or to take another example, Tucker comments on a 1952 photograph by Werner Bischof of Koreans imprisoned on the island of Koje-do:

[...] the prisoners appear only as backlit silhouettes about whom the viewer can detect nothing about their lives as prisoners except that they are well enough to stand idle in an outside area and can wash their laundry. (328)

It is not hard to find out, though: the prisoners had revolted that very year against mistreatment and starvation, putting the US camp commandant, Brigadier-General Francis Dodd, on trial. Order was restored with the use of tanks and flame-throwers, and the troops were urged to show no restraint (Halliday/ Cumings 1988: 176-9). Prisoners in such camps were subjected to frequent and often lethal violence, torture and starvation; they were often denied medical treatment. Bischof, whose other photographs of the Korean War show a marked engagement with the plight of civilians, may have been trying, by showing laundry hung on barbed wire, to suggest things that he could not directly depict.

More generally, given the diversity of the material dealt with in this encyclopaedic project, historical, political, military and photographic circumstances can only be briefly sketched in, and the introductory essays frequently fall back on cliché, and contain remarkably little analysis.

The great disadvantage of the genre-based approach is, naturally, that it tends to flatten historical differences. The massive mechanised wars of the last century are quite different from current conflicts, as are the media through which they are reported. Nuclear weaponry, little represented here, has made great power conflict extremely rare and episodic. Many armies have moved from the use of conscripts to volunteers with profound social and military consequences. In the wars waged by technologically advanced forces, ground troops play the role of provoking attacks against which devastating air attacks can be launched. There are many other historical developments, all of which tend to be played down in organisation by genre, which produces instead a loose, vaguely liberal view of war as an eternal but necessary tragedy.



In one sense, the selection of conflicts from which photographs are drawn is a broad one. The catalogue contains unusual material from Somalia, Bosnia, Chechnya, the Congo and many other combat zones. Yet there are preponderant emphases, particularly on US material: the Civil War is heavily featured; there is much on the World Wars, naturally, particularly from a US (and UK) point of view. Of the three in-depth case studies, one focuses on the battle for Iwo Jima (seen entirely from a US perspective), and the other two are photojournalistic stories, both about US casualties and grieving (Larry Burrows' celebrated 1965 'Yankee Papa 13' sequence from *Life*, and Todd Heisler's 2005 'Final Salute' on notification of deaths to Marine families). The Iwo Jima study is there, says Tucker, because it produced Joe Rosenthal's famous image of victorious US power: *Old Glory Goes Up on Mount Suribachi*. [259], an image placed at the very heart of the book. Indeed, the catalogue's opening sentence, in the foreword by Houston director Gary Tinterow, highlights the acquisition of this photograph:

Rosenthal's image has come to embody the American values associated with the pursuit of a noble endeavour—pride, honor, sacrifice and perseverance [...] (1)

The image is more important for its currency than what it shows. The conquest of the strategically unimportant island, while certainly bloody, was of little military importance. If you wanted to show a photograph of a conflict of the greatest significance, it would have to be from the battles of Stalingrad or Kursk. Yet, the Rosenthal picture is one of the best-known images of US power, and that power is of a most unusual kind. This issue stands at the heart of a number of matters which the catalogue either treads carefully around or entirely disavows.

The first and most obvious is the disavowal of the exceptional character of the US as a military power; that it alone accounts for the majority of world military spending, that its bases straddle the globe, and that it has overwhelming military superiority and a repeatedly exercised willingness to use it, at least against states without nuclear weapons. A linked disavowal is the character of US military power which, since the strategic bombing campaigns of World War II, has shown a remarkable profligacy in its use of weapons of mass destruction, and (at best) an insouciant disregard of the consequences for civilians. An example of how the military perspective reads photographs is found when Tucker cites her military 'expert' Hunt on an image of the night-firing of mobile artillery in Korea, 1951:

Weapons of this type could be brought into action very quickly and with devastating consequences for an enemy caught unprepared or above ground. And, as in this picture, the firing of heavy guns, whether on land or aboard ship, is a visually stunning spectacle. (170)

The literature about the Korean War, if you bother to read it, is clear about the colossal scale of US bombing and bombardment there, and that much of it was directed against civilians (see, for example, Halliday / Cumings 1988; Tirman 2011, ch. 4).

Generally, the consequences of this strategic and tactical disregard for lives other than those of US troops is played down, as is the history of propping up violent dictatorial regimes. This is true both of the selection of photographs and their interpretation. So, to take some notorious images from Vietnam, Nick Ut's well-known picture of Phan Ti Kim Phuc, burned in a napalm attack is shown but is accompanied with the singularly stupid comment from Hunt that since the

attack was launched by the South Vietnamese, 'Its popular symbolism and meaning is therefore not based on actual fact' [283]. As Hunt must know, the South Vietnamese armed forces were entirely a US creation, and their operations were under firm US control: both relied on indiscriminate bombardment so if Kim Phuc's injuries were 'accidental', they were an entirely predictable accident, one that was repeated millions of times.



Then there is the famous Eddie Adams picture of the execution of a bound NLF suspect by the Saigon chief of police, Nguyen Ngoc Loan. Here Tucker swallows Adams' line that Loan's life was destroyed by the picture, and his blaming of people who 'have no idea of what war is like' (242, and see the further defence on 238). This is very much to take the military perspective, given that Adams was an ex-Marine, and a fervent supporter of the war. We may want to remind ourselves of the character of Loan, a product and servant of the dictatorship. As Tom Buckley put it:

His powers were those of life and death, and at his command tens of thousands of persons were imprisoned in the tiger cages of Conson Island and elsewhere; tortured in the dreaded provincial interrogation centers; were assassinated, executed, or simply not heard from again. (Buckley 2000: 541)

So what Adams showed was merely one of many murders that Loan committed or had committed, and it was exceptional only because he permitted it to be photographed. Ron Haerberle's notorious photographs of the My Lai massacre are present only in the 'And Babies' poster made by the Art Workers' Coalition, and even here Hunt leaps to the defence of US

actions, given that the offending unit had taken casualties, and that they assumed that all villagers were Viet Cong sympathisers, which made for a ‘breakdown in discipline that led to the event’ (327). This judgement, which is cited unqualified by Tucker, is almost beyond comment, but we now have very well-documented histories that show that such massacres, by ground troops and from the air, were not aberrations but matters of consistent policy (see, among many accounts, Greiner 2009).



Much the same, incidentally, can be said of the catalogue’s handling of the Abu Ghraib images, which are only seen through the frame of an Ashley Gilbertson photograph in which a GI watches a TV programme about the torture. Hunt in a conversation with Tucker and Roberts says (once again unchallenged) that: ‘One person acting badly and taking a picture—and that picture will get out.’ (285). Yet what those soldiers did and photographed was part of a consistent policy handed down from the highest realms of the state, it occurred in many other jails, and the soldiers were being instructed by Military Intelligence officers and other shadowy ‘civilian’ figures (among many accounts, see Fusco 2008; Gourevitch/ Morris 2008; Hersh 2004; Phillips 2010).

Another disavowal is that there is very little material from (rather than of) foes of the US, with the exception of Germans in the world wars, and a little from their Vietnamese opponents, the NVA and NLF. The Soviets feature only as allies against the Axis powers; the Japanese only in retrospect, mourning their losses, and not as combatants. The Iraqi resistance to US occupation, Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, are not seen at all. There is rich visual material on all of these, some

made by the organisations themselves, and some by remarkable photojournalists such as Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, so this is a large and politically inflected omission.

What is the point of bringing the military perspective to war photography? The conservative (and especially neo-conservative) worry is that the citizenry has become disengaged from and ignorant of war and the military, with dire consequences: they may be unwilling to support the fighting of wars necessary to further global strategic interests, and they may misinterpret what they see in the media (see Halper/ Clarke 2004: 12). These concerns are reflected closely in the catalogue, particularly in Tucker's texts which try to sketch in a background which may work against public misunderstanding of what such photographs say.

The disengagement is partly structural and partly an ideological illusion. In the US and other states that have abandoned conscription, the whole point is to be able to wage wars without the involvement of large numbers of the public; volunteers are overwhelmingly drawn from the least privileged sectors of society with predictable effects on their fitness for service (Kennard 2012), and elite, opinion-making people are personally protected from the consequences of war. This was one of the 'lessons' of Vietnam. Given the current pliancy of the mass media in the face of power, this disengagement has another positive effect, from the point of view of the warring state: public indifference to casualties except those among home troops. John Tirman, in his recent book, examines the reasons for American indifference to the staggering scale of civilian loss of life inflicted by their armed forces since the Second World War, which include racism, and the continuing sway of the frontier ideal of redemptive violence (Tirman 2011: 342-62). Perry Anderson adds another: the fatal combination of 'the provincialism of an electorate with minimal knowledge of the outside world' and a political system that 'gives virtually untrammelled power to the executive in the conduct of foreign affairs' (Anderson 2013).

At the same time, across the media, in news and mass culture, the military view is insistently put: we have a very good idea of what it is or was like to be a member of the armed forces in occupied Iraq and Afghanistan from numerous reports, photographs, videos, movies and computer games. It is what it is like to be under occupation that remains the subject of near total neglect. In this sense, yet more elaboration of the military perspective is the last thing needed.

The very scale and grandeur of the exhibition and catalogue work against specific argument and analysis, and may if anything reinforce US provincialism. There are points, as we have seen, when the interpretations are specifically imperialist and selectively amnesiac; mostly, however, the catalogue merely adopts the commonsense, elite point of view, which is no less deadly to those who find themselves at the wrong end of the 'ordnance'. That view may be broadly stated as follows: 'we are sorry that you found yourself in the way of our geopolitical aims; your death/ maiming/ torture/ rape / impoverishment/ starvation / exile are unfortunate, but there can be no conflict without collateral damage, and war is always a tragic and magnificent affair; depending on your nationality/ politics/ gender/ age / photogenic qualities, you may find yourself the subject of memorialisation.' In this way, the catalogue serves as a richly produced and partly inadvertent monument to US imperial power.

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