Irene Alison

Postcards from the Apocalypse. Contemplating (or Making Sense of?) Mess in War Photography*

Abstract: Is it morally justifiable to work as a photographer in war zones and disaster areas? Why are we all so attracted to images of other people's misery? Do these images make us more aware of the horror that we are able to generate and will this knowledge be useful in order to avoid generating such chaos? Alison articulates a reflection on photography as a tool for contemplating the mess but also for making sense of it.

Keywords: *conflict*, *documentary*, *memory*, *photobook*, *photography*, *war*

The first time I took *War Porn* in my hands – taking it from the shelf where it was on display among the finalists for the title of Best Photobook of the Year during the 2015 edition of Paris Photo Fair – I had the same reaction many others had.

I opened it, I flipped through a few pages, I closed it abruptly.

Like everyone, or at least like a fairly large sample of viewers whose reactions I observed at the Grand Palais (where Paris Photo is held every year), I tried to come back to the book. To test my eyes and my stomach on my ability to bear images of a disaster with no escape. Of mutilated, mangled, burned, piled up bodies. Children lying in hospital beds with congealed blood and open wounds. Men from whom the war has taken not only life but also human dignity: reducing them to mere bodies in a dump, pieces of meat. A meal for dogs and vultures. Things.

German photographer Christoph Bangert,[1] arguably author of one of the most controversial photo books of all times,[2] put together in this 192 pages volume – with a simple cover in gray cardboard and a title, *War Porn*, printed in small typewriter font – all the horrors he has collected as a war photographer: his own apocalyptic vision of disaster, the result of the many years he spent covering conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon and Gaza, and witnessing with his own eyes, in real time, the mess and the scars left by war.

Inexplicably, or perhaps all too understandably, the most brutal (or revelatory) images Bangert took during his career have been systematically rejected by magazines and newspapers. They were locked in his drawers and in his memory, weighing like an unspoken secret, a burden too heavy to bear. That's why Bangert decided to share the horror in a book, consciously defying any theoretical argument about the legitimacy of photographing the pain. That's why he labeled his images, in the collection's title *War Porn*, "pornography", a pejorative term he expected they would be pinned with. "In discussions about photography that documents wars, the argument that these pictures are dehumanizing or pornographic always comes up", he notes. But, he continues, "If you say it is

[1] Http://www.christophbangert.com/.

[2] Ed Kehrer, 2014, many of the photos are available here https://vimeo.com/111090817.

morally wrong to look at them, you avoid being confronted with these events".[3]

The book raises, or rather throws at the reader, a series of old (but always urgent) questions about photographing the mess, the pain, the disaster, questions partly suggested by the author himself: "Do I exploit my subjects? Is it morally justifiable to work as a photographer in war zones and disaster areas? Why are we all so attracted to images of other people's misery?" But above all: Do these images make us more aware of the horror that we are able to generate? Will this knowledge be useful in order to avoid generating such chaos? Is photography a tool for making sense of or merely for contemplating the mess?

Photography, however, is not a language for clear and unequivocal answers. *War Porn*'s images try to pursue the readers' consciousness and conscience with the evidence of a collective guilt; we are convicted of a responsibility and crime to which no one can truly claim to be innocent. Yet, at the very moment we open the book, our impulse is to close it again – as if trying to close Pandora's box. Our response speaks to the need to remove immediately from our retinas and our memory what we saw in order to protest our innocence.

John Berger's 1972 analysis on "photography of agony", pointed out how the shock effect of disaster images depoliticizes the causes, accusing "nobody and everybody".[4] Similarly, Susan Sontag famously argued that the spectacle of the pain of others produces addiction: "the vast photographic catalogue of misery and injustice throughout the world has given everyone a certain familiarity with atrocity, making the horrible seem even more ordinary – making it appear familiar, remote ('it's only a photograph'), inevitable".[5]

But if it's arguable, as Sontag also stated, that no ecology of images is feasible in the society of the spectacle,[6] it is all the more emphatic that this "ecology" is not achievable in the society of the *viral* spectacle, where each image is produced and uncontrollably shared in the endless meanderings of the web.

While Bangert's photographs were rejected by newspapers (or, in a more subtle form of self-censorship, they have never been released by their author), this does not mean they represent something "invisible". The Internet is full of images of the most horrendous, unwatchable, unbearable consequences of war, ready to infect the spectator with the same messy and tumultuous flow that pours out of the pages of Bangert's book.

Opening and closing repeatedly the pages of *War Porn* to understand how much violence my eyes are able to bear, I wonder what principle of morality is at work when we judge the production or the consumption of these images as "morally wrong". I also wonder how looking at such images without any critical context – seeing them as just a long trail of blood, a gruesome parade of corpses of people lying unnamed across the pages – can contribute to increase my/our awareness of the ontology of war. Or how such looking can change the substance of what we already know: war is mess, horror and death, and it is something we do not want to see.

[3] https://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/11/24/choosing-to-look-at-war-porn/?_r=0.

[4] John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Classics, 1972).

[5] Susan Sontag, *On Photograpraphy* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1978), 21.

[6] Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002).

War Porn ends with the images of the photographer's grandfather, a Nazi officer and a life-long fervent supporter of Hitler. That portrait is a testimony (perhaps the most powerful in the book) as to what degree of aberration a man can reach when he refuses to open his eyes. This closing image suggests that *War Porn*, serves more as provocation than as reflection. Rather than being merely the object of our gaze, the collection's mission may be to show us what we are not willing to look at or capable of looking at it; to remind us of the words written by the photographer Kenneth Jarecke (whose shocking images of the first Gulf War were rejected by almost all American newspapers) on *American Photo Magazine* in 1991: "If we're big enough to fight a war, we should be big enough to look at it".[7]

[7] https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/08/the-war-photo-no-one-would-publish/375762/, accessed 10 June 2017.

If it is not in *War Porn* pages, it is in the halls of London's Tate Modern that many of the questions on the utility and legitimacy of photography as a tool to document and interpret the disaster may find a possible answer. Among the most interesting visual paths curated by Tate's Photography and International Art curator Simon Baker, the exhibition *Conflict, Time, Photography* (opened in November 2014) proposed an extensive reflection on the relationship between photography, memory and the consequences of war, on the power of images to represent and narrate mess, chaos and conflict. The exhibition, a wide and meticulous meditation on the possibility of "looking back" without freezing the past, was inspired by Billy Pilgrim character's time travels in *Slaughterhouse #5*, the novel Kurt Vonnegut wrote twenty-four years after he escaped the Dresden bombing during World War II. Scrambling the chronological order of events and ranging across different visual languages, the exhibition organized the works by 38 artists – from American Civil War to Vietnam, from the launch of the atomic bomb to the Crimean War, from Afghanistan to Nicaragua – in relation to the time gap between the events and the moment when their pictures were taken. So, at the beginning of the exhibition's path, in the "Moments Later" section, we can see the dense smoke cloud just lifted from a US bombing in Afghanistan depicted by photographer Luc Delahaye; we can read the terror in the eyes of a *marine* on a Vietnam battlefield, portrayed by Don McCullin in a famous shot; or we can follow the long colored trail left by the light on a six-meters photographic paper exposed to Afghani sun by Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin in *The Day Nobody Died* project, a conceptual negation of the traditional imagery of war and a harsh criticism of embedded journalism.

Days, months, and years after the conflict, wounds are still open, seeds of war still bear their bitter fruits: Jo Ratcliff, in *Land Occupado*, photographed a messy and devastated Angola five years after the end of the civil war; Taryn Simon, in *A Living Man Declared Dead*, recomposed from a 16-years distance the mosaic of the families broken by the Srebrenica massacre; Stephen Shore portrayed, 67 years after the end of the Second World War, faces and memories of Holocaust survivors for his project *Ukraine*. But the most powerful expression of the exhibition's

diachronic gaze on mess is probably revealed by the eyes of the photographers who witnessed the Hiroshima and Nagasaki disaster: from the monstrous presence of the atomic mushroom photographed by the 17-year-old student Toshio Fukada twenty minutes after the explosion, to the book *Hiroshima* by Ken Domon, a document of the long-term effects of radiation on the Japanese population 13 years after the bomb. The images from *Conflict, Time, Photography* testify to the power of photography, not only – and not primarily – to describe what happened in those places, but also to explain why those disasters continue to leave a trace many years later.

Far from the (often) dull immediacy of photojournalism, the exhibition – not only for the quality of the images on display but especially for the construction of enlightening contexts around them – opens up a space for thinking and understanding. The pictures in *Conflict, Time, Photography* are no less painful than those in *War Porn* but, with its slower pace, the exhibition is able to reveal how long it takes to clean up the mess of war and how the conflict often shows its real face, its hidden motivations and its most painful consequences from the distance of time.

From the distance of time emerges also *They Fight with Camera*,[8] a photobook (Roma: Postcart, 2015) reassembling the fragments of the work of Walter Rosenblum, American photojournalist who documented the Second World War on the Allies' side. Rosenblum (1919-2006) was present during D-day: he shot one of the iconic moments that, along with Robert Capa's images, remain in the collective memory as symbols of that day. Rosenblum was also the first Allied troops' photographer to enter Dachau's concentration camp after the liberation, so powerfully contributing to the documentation of the heinous mess of a war whose consequences continue to send echoes that reach our times. No war in history transformed the world so radically in destroying cities, modifying national boundaries, killing tens of millions of people, and extending atrocities beyond any conceivable limit. No war until then had ever been documented so widely by thousands of photographers like Walter Rosenblum. Seventy years later, the power of their images does not fade. Looking at them today, we are still stunned by the disaster they testify to, but no longer overwhelmed by the shock, we can find some clarity to better understand the wars we fight and the world we live in. "One thing I learned from photography is that we all have the same aspirations, the same needs, the same desires. These are the things I try to tell in my shots", Rosenblum wrote in the midst of the war.[9] And after having fought with the camera around his neck, after having faced the evil at Dachau and having been present thorough the mess on a beach in Normandy, Rosenblum leaves us the legacy of these words: "to me taking a picture is like writing a love letter".

[8] Some images are available here: http://www.postcart.com/libri-dettaglio.php?id=131&c=.

[9] Manuela Fugenzi, *They Fight with Cameras: Walter Rosenblum in WWII from D-Day to Dachau* (Roma: Postcart, 2014), 8.

* The contribution by Irene Alison is the only one in this issue without peer-review. Due both to the notoriety

and professional reputation of the author -- an established journalist, curator, and founder of the consulting studio for documentary photography "Doll's Eye Reflex Laboratory" -- and to her non-academic profile, and because of the nature of her brief intervention, which reads as a series of notes and critical observations rather than as a conventional scholarly essay, the text seemed to resist the stringent criteria of academic writing and its reviewing process, but was nevertheless deemed a valuable contribution, by an established non-academic professional, to the issue.