What Does War Look Like?
Photography and the Management of the Field of Vision in Iraq and Afghanistan, 2001-Present

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Abstract

Some of the most celebrated and well-known photographs in existence are of war. When we think of ‘war photography’, we tend to recall a small number of iconic images which have endured in the public imagination. By contrast, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were the most mediatised conflicts in history, and yet from the vast corpus of imagery produced, arguably none have come to define these wars in the public imagination. Why?

Following an established belief in the negative impact of media coverage during the Vietnam War, accounts of the media in war position the objectives of the military and the media as incompatible. They typically adopt a simplistic understanding of the sources of photographic effect which draws a straight line between the event—of which the photograph is considered an unproblematic trace—and its political impact. Such an approach cannot fully account for the vagaries of the news photograph as a political vessel.

The media policy put in place for the 2003 invasion of Iraq and subsequently introduced in Afghanistan marked the beginning of a more experimental approach to media-military relations characterised by synergy rather than opposition, and one in which the photograph—as a vessel of political communication—operated primarily as a connotative symbol rather than as a denotative index of particular events. By combining elements of Cultural Studies literature with empirical data, this dissertation seeks to ask what War Studies can learn from understanding the role and functioning of the image in war and finds that the field of vision remained firmly sublimated to established political discourse which resonates more closely with American national mythology than it does with particular news events.
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Introduction

It is asserted that a bursting shell can be photographed. The time is perhaps at hand when a flash of light, as sudden and brief as that of the lightning which shows a whirling wheel standing stock still, shall preserve the very instant of the shock of contact of the mighty armies that are even now gathering.

— Oliver Wendell Holmes, 1864

This dissertation is about war and news photographs. There are many accounts of the evolving significance of the media in war, both in general and in specific cases. These accounts typically focus on written and TV journalism (the ‘CNN effect’), and situate media and military objectives as opposed. This view follows an established belief that U.S. media coverage of the Vietnam War dealt the decisive blow in turning public opinion against continued fighting. Photographs, however, are rarely considered as the primary unit of analysis. Despite the increasing dominance of image flows and visual technologies, social science research into the political effects of the image remains marginal. Where they do feature in the literature, photographs are positioned as secondary, illustrative counterparts to written accounts and are denied the possibility of independent agency. This dissertation seeks to ask what War Studies can learn from understanding the role and functioning of the image in war.

1 Inter alia, Carruthers (2011); Knightley (2003); Rid (2007); Derrick, Mungham and Williams (1987); Hallin (1989); Harris (1983); Morrison and Tumber (1988); Taylor (1992); Tumber and Palmer (2004).


3 Brothers’ account of the role of photography during the Spanish Civil War is a notable exception. See Brothers (1997).
It is concerned with the effects of news photographs during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and how they have worked to manufacture passive consent by structuring public apprehension of those conflicts in particular ways. Accounts of the media in war tend to draw a straight line between the production of media content and its political effects. Yet this approach cannot account for the vagary of the news photograph as a political object. Why is it that certain images endure across time where others, of equal visceral impact, do not? Why is it that certain images become ‘iconic’, while others of arguably equal significance are forgotten by history? By contrast, cultural studies literature wears a rich theoretical fabric which seeks to identify the sources of photographic effect. In understanding the full significance of news photographs of war, there seems to be an urgent need for dialogue between these two bodies of work, but one that an institutionalised separation of academic labour has prevented from progressing in the ways that it demands. This dissertation bridges this divide, bringing together elements of photographic theory and criticism with empirical data from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in order to understand the political effects of news images.

Mechanical reproduction, like war, has a long history: both were industrialised in new ways in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century. The invention of the Kodak Box Brownie in 1888 marked the beginning of a process of technological innovation that turned the camera into a consumer product. Flexible celluloid films replaced wet and gelatine dry plates; light-sealed film casings allowed the loading and unloading of films outside of the darkroom; and the miniaturisation of these technologies into small-format handheld cameras by the Kodak Company paved the way for the vast commercial success of the personal camera.

The mechanisation of photographic technology would also have a profound effect on the conduct and recording of war. While the presence of the camera on the battlefield was by

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4 Bennet et. al. (2006); Schwalbe (2013); Fahey and Kim (2008) all take a statistical analysis approach to conclude that the majority of published photographs were politically benign.

5 The Kodak ‘Box Brownie’ model required that the entire camera be mailed to a Kodak facility in order to have the film safely extracted, processed and replaced. Although marketed under the slogan ‘You press the button, we do the rest’, it was only with the invention of light-sealed film casings that the action of taking a photograph and the technical process of developing the film became fully separated.

6 Harris (2012), p. 103.
no means new—Roger Fenton and Matthew Brady had both produced a substantial archive of photographs from the Crimean and American Civil Wars respectively—the mechanisation and miniaturisation of photographic technology, alongside advances in printing technology, made the presence of the camera on the battlefield at the turn of the twentieth century a fundamentally different proposition. The sheer tonnage of equipment carried by Fenton and Brady (along with horse-drawn mobile darkrooms) and the long shutter speeds required to achieve a full exposure placed severe limitations on the scope of their coverage. Furthermore, the newspaper presses at the time did not have the technology to reproduce halftones in newsprint, and so their photographs appeared only as stereoscopic cards, in souvenir albums and formed the basis for engravings produced by war artists in the pages of magazines like *Harper’s, Illustrated London News* and *The Graphic*, accompanied by the words ‘From a photograph’ as a mark of their authenticity.

The industrialisation of photographic and communications technologies radically changed this. New commercial models saw the emergence of a vastly expanded and largely anonymous pool of image creators, and faster shutter speeds of 1/50 of a second meant that it was no longer necessary for battle scenes to be performed for the camera after the event (frequently in a manner favourable to both the lens and political imperatives). Images could be captured in real-time from a perspective immersed in the action, and transmitted telegraphically. Halftone printing was widely adopted by commercial presses from the 1890s onwards, allowing the widespread reproduction of photographs in newsprint. Although the event recorded by the camera became ‘fixed’, the image that resulted could travel, reaching hitherto discrete audiences in unprecedented ways. The camera now had the potential to offer distant populations a candid view onto the battlefield.

As the popularity of the camera increased, its appeal did not elude those enlisted in the military. As recent scholarship has uncovered, by the turn of the twentieth century photography was well-established across the British Empire, and camera use among rank-and-file soldiers was widespread as early as the 1902 Boer War and 1903 Younghusband Expedition to Tibet. As Clare Harris notes of Tibet, soldiers’ own photographs were

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9 Harris (2012).
frequently used by journalists to accompany articles such that by the time troops had reached Gyantse, Younghusband had received clippings that had appeared in the British press—a testament to the accelerated speed of distribution and an emerging field of interaction between military operations and the media. The presence of photographs in newspapers allowed domestic populations to visualise the otherwise mysterious terrain on which the Expeditionary Force had marched. But they did so selectively, in a way that ‘embellish[ed] the mystery of Tibet and impl[ied] that Younghusband had made smooth progress to its capital’, and as Harris further observes, ‘when reports of massacres began to seep out … newspaper articles were no longer accompanied by photographs’—a pattern that worked to ‘render invisible’ the more unsettling aspects of the campaign.

A little more than ten years later, the outbreak of the First World War saw a further surge in camera sales as the ‘Vest Pocket Kodak’—so called because the light chamber on the camera was collapsible so that it could be carried discretely on one’s person—caught on among British soldiers soon to depart for mainland Europe. Advertised as the ‘The Soldier’s Kodak’ with the tag line ‘Make your own picture record of the war’, many officers and a smaller number of infantrymen carried them into battle to document their experiences. In 1914, approximately 5,500 units were sold, rising to more than 28,000 the following year. This coincided with peaked consumer demand for pictorial accounts of the conflict, sufficient to warrant the launch of new photographic publications like The War Illustrated. While quietly enlisting the lens as a military technology, the British government’s War Propaganda Office created a special team in 1914 tasked with the management of all pictorial matter. Although any formal notion of ‘photojournalism’ was yet to materialise, photographing the front lines and battlefields was banned in almost all circumstances. Strict censorship controls were

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12 Griffin (1999); Lewinski (1978).
14 See Colin Harding, ‘The Vest Pocket Kodak was the Soldier’s Camera’, National Media Museum Blog. (Available at: http://blog.nationalmediamuseum.org.uk/2014/03/13/the-vest-pocket-kodak-was-the-soldiers-camera/)
15 The elision of photography and flight elevated the utility of reconnaissance missions and topographic mapping: the British are estimated to have produced 6.5 million aerial photographs in the final year of the First World War alone. See Cosgrove and Fox (2010).
enacted and a decision was taken to allow only a small number of accredited photographers (who were made lieutenants and were thus subject to military discipline) access to the war zone to create an official visual record.

The role of the camera during the wars of the early twentieth century highlights the entanglement of war and photography. These conflicts saw the early deployment of the camera as a military technology—implicit in the perpetration of violence, and a harbinger of the future potential of optic technologies on the battlefield. At the same time, the anxiety exhibited by military authorities about the existence of unofficial photographic records and the selective use of photography to render visible and invisible particular aspects of these conflicts demonstrates a perceived ability to galvanise political response.

If we move our temporal frame abruptly forward to the late 1960s, the photograph’s potential for political effect becomes immediately apparent. Critical media coverage is generally acknowledged to have played a pivotal role in bringing about U.S. withdrawal from the Vietnam War, and our collective memory of it remains loosely structured around a number of well-known photographs, all of which cast a negative light on U.S. involvement. Yet if we update our temporal frame to the present, this situation is seemingly turned on its head: why is it that, despite being the most mediatised conflicts in history, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq arguably produced no comparably iconic images that have come to define those conflicts?

It is with this question—with the management of the field of vision for political effect—that this dissertation is concerned. It proceeds from the assertion that the photograph is an active political site: photographs not only record political events, but do political things. To conceive of the camera as an impartial witness, its product a fixed and indexical imprint of reality, is to neglect photography’s profound capacity to construct narratives as well as record events. As Butler notes, ‘the frame does not simply exhibit reality, but … selectively produc[es] and enforc[es] what will count as reality.’ Photographs ‘evoke’ and not only ‘recount a story’, and in the context of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, they have worked repetitively

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18 Photographic technologies have, inter alia, figured prominently in target acquisition, Reagan’s ‘Star Wars’ programme, infra-red imaging and night vision technologies, and the piloting of unmanned aerial vehicles.
19 Stallabrass (2013).
21 Bolt (2012), p. 120.
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and systematically such that, as Virilio argues, ‘the representation of events [has] outstripped the presentation of facts’.

Estelle Jussim writes of the ‘inability of a single photograph to function as propaganda’, as it can only ever contain either the problem or the solution, and never both simultaneously. It was perhaps this realisation that led film theorist Béla Balázs to observe that ‘only montage could turn single images into truths or falsehoods’—that juxtaposition was required in order for an audience to ‘be effectively jolted out of complacency and readied for new beliefs’. News stories, too, are often ‘positioned across time and space’ so their ‘meaning [becomes] dependent on multiple images to depict an ongoing sequence of events’. In war, an event which sprawls across both time and space, this tendency is exacerbated. This dissertation is thus concerned with the political effects of the corpus of imagery produced during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The emergence of ‘embedded journalism’ is often cited as an explanation for the limits on what we do and don’t see in war—that by regulating the field of vision, ‘the state works on the field of perception and, more generally, the field of representability, in order to control affect’. The embedding programmes in Iraq and Afghanistan were the most efficacious examples of this approach to date, but a singular emphasis on rendering visible and invisible certain aspects of these wars neglects the broader and yet more subtle semiotic work performed by photographs in structuring our apprehension of the events depicted therein. In addition to rendering the ‘field of vision’ associated with these wars largely sanitised of violence, the repetition of familiar subjects and themes has usurped the space in which an otherwise more critical analysis of those conflicts might have taken place in the public imagination. This development, this paper argues, reflects a shift from the regulation of pictorial content emerging from the battlefield—through censorship, containment and limitation of access—to a more all-encompassing management of the field of vision itself in which, as Butler asserts, the image ‘prepare[es] and structur[es] … public understanding of

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24 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
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what war is’. The extent to which images now saturate the contemporary mediascape, often at the expense of written content, makes a fuller understanding of the political work that photographs do all the more urgent.

The first chapter of this dissertation outlines the theoretical positions on the creation of photographic effect, and considers how these may relate to news media and the war photograph as a political object. The second chapter places these arguments in context, taking as its empirical starting point the Vietnam War in order to chart the historical trajectory that the management of the field of vision has taken in its wake. The third chapter examines how photographs produced during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have worked to construct particular ‘frames’ through which the public’s collective gaze onto these wars is focussed. Finally, it draws together a series of concluding observations about the impact and likely legacy of this circumscribed field of vision.

28 Ibid., p. xv.
1. Theorising the Field of Vision in War

Photojournalism, in its traditional form, holds a lofty and idealistic ambition. In David Levi Strauss’s words, by ‘photographing the truth’, it was thought, the camera could ‘influence public opinion and public policy, and change the world’.\(^\text{29}\) Although emerging before any organised concept of ‘photojournalism’, the work of early social reform photographers conforms to this model. Jacob Riis’s ‘How the Other Half Lives’ documented the squalid conditions of the slums in 1880s New York and formed the basis for ‘muckraker’ journalism which shone an increasingly harsh light on social inequalities, while Lewis Hine’s photographic exposé of the prevalence of child labour in early-1900s America pushed legislatures to swiftly outlaw the practice.\(^\text{30}\)

But is the line between the publication of a photograph and social effect necessarily straight and uninterrupted, or is it complicated by other contingent factors? In the context of war, the troublesome element of Levi Strauss’s phrasing is not the monumental task of influencing public opinion and policy, nor even of ‘chang[ing] the world’; it is with ‘photographing the truth’—that by simply exposing war as it really is, politicians and the wider public will be moved to correct its ills. It is an idea that has been given new theoretical impetus by the work of Robert Hariman, John Louis Lucaites and Ariella Azoulay, who see the photographic event as productive of a set of energising and transformative political relations between photographer, subject and viewer.\(^\text{31}\) This mode of analysis locates agency exclusively with the photograph as the trace of an event—an example of what Victor Burgin describes as the ‘quasi-formalist notion that the photograph derives its semantic properties from the conditions that reside within the image itself’.\(^\text{32}\)


\(^{30}\) Richtin (2013), p. 15.

\(^{31}\) See Azoulay (2008); Azoulay (2012); Hariman and Lucaites (2007).

This is not obviously the case with photojournalism. Indeed, the most celebrated images typically hold their status because of a perceived symbolism that transcends the contents of the frame. Dorothea Lange’s ‘Migrant Mother’ (Fig. 1) shows us thirty-two-year-old Florence Thompson with two of her children, working as pea-pickers on a California farm, and yet is considered symbolic of the Great Depression and resilience in the face of adversity. Similarly, Joe Rosenthal’s ‘Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima’ is celebrated as a symbol of American victory in the Second World War, and yet the photograph itself shows only the raising of a U.S. flag on top of Mount Suribachi. This is not to detract from the power of these images, but to make the point that photographs clearly do not operate within a single and straightforward signifying system.

This chapter examines how and from where photographs acquire ‘meaning’ and exert influence, both in the short term and as historical bookmarks to time periods or series of events that are revisited and reinterpreted long after the moment of capture.
Sources of Photographic Effect

THE INDEX

The cornerstone of photojournalism’s ability to influence is the ‘realism’ of the photograph: its perceived consonance with truth. As John Berger notes, ‘unlike any other visual image, a photograph is not a rendering, an imitation or an interpretation of its subject, but actually a trace of it’. For Caroline Brothers, the photograph—a hybrid blend of art and science—is ‘physically caused by its referent’, for Roland Barthes, ‘the referent adheres’—‘I cannot deny that the thing has been there’; and for Walter Benjamin, the photographic image is one in which ‘reality has ... seared the subject’. If it exists in a photograph, it happened. Charles Saunders Peirce termed this photography’s ‘indexicality’, and argued that it is the physical relationship between the camera and the object that appears in any resulting photograph—likened to the relationship between smoke and fire—that grants photography ‘special status with regard to the real’.  

THE ‘BLIND FIELD’

The notion of indexicality underpins the perceived evidentiary quality of the photograph, a form of testimony credible by virtue of its very existence. Yet the camera’s inability to lie about the event—the physical presence of the object in front of the camera at the time of capture—is not automatically consonant with any broader notion of ‘photographic truth’, for the things photographs are often said to ‘show’—in the non-literal sense—are rarely drawn exclusively from the anterior contents of the frame. As Berger writes, ‘the only decision he [the photographer] can take is as regards the moment he chooses to isolate. Yet this apparent

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limitation gives the photograph its unique power. *What is shown invokes what is not shown.* Barthes termed this the photograph’s ‘blind field’.

Consider the shooting of Neda Agha-Soltan in Tehran in 2009. A forty-second sequence captured on a bystander’s mobile phone shows the twenty-six-year-old student folding to the floor having been shot in the chest on an election demonstration. As she enters her final moments, a stream of blood pouring from her mouth, she stares directly into the lens, puncturing the scene and imploring the viewer to watch, to witness her death. And watch the world did. The video appeared across the internet and as a still in nearly every major news publication, including an above-the-fold placement on the front page of the *Wall

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Indeed, the image became so widely distributed that when *Time* listed Agha-Soltan as one of the ‘Top 10 Heroes of 2009’, Krista Mahr labelled the event ‘probably the most widely witnessed death in human history’. But why? What was it about the death of Agha-Soltan that so fervently gripped the public imagination? What does the video and the stills drawn from it actually show? Quickly migrated into new political contexts (notwithstanding controversies over the identity of the ‘girl in the photograph’), the image of her death—which gained primacy over the video itself, deemed too graphic for broadcast—came to embody not only the event, but a variety of broader political mantras: the tyranny of the Ahmadinejad government; the righteousness of the ongoing ‘Green Revolution’; Iran’s imperfect human rights record and pariah status with much of the international community; the oppression of women in the wider Middle East. The single and unaltered frame worked to evidence not only the event, but a variety of subjective epistemologies.

A number of theorists have alluded to this ability of the photograph to exceed its physical contents and assume a broader meaning and symbolism. Barbie Zelizer describes the photograph as an ‘implicative relay’ or ‘suggestive slice’ which ‘forc[es] people to imagine a sequence of action beyond the picture’s taking’, while Barthes identified in the photograph a ‘dual process of signification’—one literal, the other implied. Variously described as a ‘privileged’, ‘decisive’, ‘pregnant’, ‘story-telling’ moment, the arrested frame is both denotative and connotative—showing not only what ‘is there’, what Berger describes as a ‘record of things seen’, but also transcending that which is physically contained within the frame—simultaneously both historical and prophetic—to evoke a broader and more generalised history and symbolism. Barthes further pointed to this functional duality in his seminal work *Camera Lucida*, where he noted the existence of both the *corps*—the event—and the *corpus*—the broader narrative of which the image is a constitutive element, and yet which, as a result of its defining particularity, the single, contingent image is unable to substantiate.

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41 Mahr (2009).
45 Zelizer (2010), p. 3.
The photograph cannot show the universal, and yet we demand that it does, reading into it inferences and connotations that are ‘wholly ballasted by the contingency of which it [the corps of the image] is a weightless, transparent envelope’.47

For many theorists, whom we might label social constructivists, context is paramount. Photography as a technique is of little consequence; it is only animated and given power by the subsequent uses of the image. John Tagg rejects the photograph as a ‘single coherent medium’, arguing that ‘photography as such has no identity: … Its nature as a practice depends on the institutions and agents which define it and set it to work.’48 Umberto Eco locates agency with the photograph’s interaction with a ‘patrimony of knowledge’ which reflects the viewers ‘ideological, ethical, religious standpoints, his psychological attitudes, his tastes, his value systems’.49 For Alan Sekula, the photograph itself ‘presents merely the possibility of meaning … only by its embeddedness in a concrete discourse situation can the photograph yield a clear semantic outcome.’50 And for Burgin, meaning inheres not in the photograph itself, but in its interaction with ‘a complex of texts, rhetorics, codes, woven into the fabric of the popular preconscious.’51 While these theorists differ on the location to which they attribute the source of photographic meaning, they all agree that it is contingent and drawn from something beyond the surface contents of the image. This makes the photograph enormously malleable, and suggests that without any alteration of the visual data contained therein, a single photograph may assume a variety of contextually-specific meanings.

War Photographs: A Filtered Gaze

The use of images in the news is predicated upon the indexical link between photograph and event. As Hall notes, ‘photos of an event carry within them a meta-message: “this event really happened and this photo is the proof of it”’.52 While generally secondary to text, news photographs serve to authenticate the version of events described—‘to back up or “prove”

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contentions made in the article’. But if much of a photograph’s effect is in fact contingent, what are the implications of this for the reproduction of photographs on the assumption that their indexicality unproblematically grants access to the event? As Zelizer notes, ‘the incorporation of images into news challenges many expectations about how images work’.

IN THE CAMERA: SUBJECTIVE OBJECTIVITY

While consumers are generally sensitive to the subjective inflections that cut across written accounts of news events, the myth of photographic verisimilitude sees a privileging of the indexical, denotative quality of the photograph. However, like all photographs, they too possess connoted, subjective effects that speak more to ideological frames than to an impression of the world ‘as it is’. Emphasis on the indexical only serves to ‘disguise the degree of selectivity that defines them’. ‘By appearing literally to reproduce the event as it really happened, news photographs repress their selective/interpretative/ideological function’, raising important questions about the effect of the ‘emotional, contingent, and imagined appeal that images wield in a supposedly rational mediated environment’.

News photographs come ‘preloaded’ with subjective inflections which, by shaping the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of what is depicted, work to delimit and constrain the visual field of war. At the outset, it is important to note that the sources from which news organisations draw their imagery have become increasingly consolidated, as the major picture agencies—Reuters, Getty Images, Agence France-Presse, Corbis and Associated Press—have either bought out or forced out their smaller competitors. Consequently, the pool of imagery made available on newswires to mainstream media outlets is increasingly narrow, and often sees the same photographs appear across different publications. Chéroux’s study of the use of photographs in 400 American daily newspapers on 11 and 12 September 2001 showed 95 per cent ran at

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54 Zelizer (2005), p. 28.
55 Ibid., p. 31.
56 Brothers (1997), p. 11.
59 In 2011-12, Corbis alone agreed a co-distribution arrangement with Associated Press and acquired the citizen-sourced newswire Demotix.
least one picture of 9/11, and of these, 72 per cent were sourced from Associated Press, indicating the extent to which the photographic visualisation of major historical events is determined by an increasingly narrow pool of image creators.60

The body of images supplied to these agencies for distribution has also become increasingly homogenous. The taking of a photograph is a subjective act: the decision of the photographer to raise the camera and depress the shutter button reflects a split-second judgement of perceived value. Our collective visual impression of war is thus at the outset constrained by the subjectivities of those tasked with producing it: as Simon Norfolk has argued, ‘the problem … starts with what is being generated on the battlefield’.61 But the kinds of photographs produced are also increasingly dictated by an emergent visual vocabulary that speaks as much to a perceived idea of what war photography in particular, and photojournalism in general, ought to look like as it does to the event in question. Characterised by fragmentation rather than coherence, this vocabulary privileges traces, objects and emotions as metonyms for events: the dog tag substitutes for a fallen soldier; a pool of bloodied water for the aftermath of a suicide bombing.62 This ‘aesthetic of the trace’ reveals what Judith Butler labels ‘contemporary photography’s tendency to aestheticise suffering for the purposes of satisfying consumer demand’ in a manner that obscures the significance of particular events in the interests of conforming to generalised aesthetic preference.63

IN THE MEDIA: NEW(S) EVENTS, OLD PHOTOGRAPHS

As photographs are still by and large treated by journalists not as ‘constructions’ but as authentic records of events, their importance is thought to increase as the import of the event(s) they depict grows.65 ‘Unsettled’ news events—including wars—typically cause a ‘turn to the visual’—an increased reliance on photographs to provide ancillary information.66 Yet such coverage often avoids depiction of the events themselves, a tendency which increases

60 Chéroux (2012).
63 Butler (2010), p. 69.
exponentially when the victim(s) becomes geographically or culturally proximate to the viewer. When illustrating stories with a strong visceral component, the media tend to favour familiar photographs that ‘symbolise socially shared concepts or beliefs rather than present new or unfamiliar [and indeed uncomfortable] information’. This preference for ‘undemanding images suited to mass-mediated collective memory’ sees the same (or very similar) images reproduced in different contexts because they are thought to ‘encapsulate the war for ordinary viewers’. As David Campbell has put it:

The news photographs that the public ends up seeing are chosen less for their descriptive function or disruptive potential and more for their capacity to provide symbolic markers to familiar interpretations and conventional narratives.

As Zelizer argues, the use of images that reflect generalised themes and symbols over the particularities of the event in question allows the ‘as if’—the imagined, emotional and contingent connotations of the image—to prevail over the ‘as is’, ‘reflect[ing] more about subjunctive visions of the world than … what is transpiring on the ground’. In the context of war photography, this has for viewers marked a ‘shift from the occasional and distant occurrence of nodal conflicts to a stream of more connected and seemingly co-present wars’, such that ‘wars and conflicts tend to merge, losing their specific histories, including any sense of what may be at stake’.

If, as Butler argues, ‘whether and how we respond to the suffering of others, how we formulate moral criticisms, how we articulate political analyses, depends upon a certain field of perceptible reality having already been established’, then this circumscription of the public gaze onto distant wars surely undermines this. In Butler’s view, such photographs do

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74 Butler (2010), p. 64.
more than ‘merely reflect on the material conditions of war’; they are ‘essential to the perpetually crafted animus of that material reality’.75

PHOTOGRAPHIC MEMORIES, PHOTOGRAPHIC HISTORIES

Photographs also play an instrumental role in structuring collective memory of the events they depict.76 Berger remarked that ‘with the invention of photography we acquired a new means of expression more closely associated with memory than any other’;77 and Sontag has claimed that the photograph ‘substitutes for the event to such an extent that it structures memory more effectively than either understanding or narrative’.78 But the prominence of photographs—selective, subjective and malleable—as ‘memory texts’ raises important questions about their historicisation: to what extent do photographs ‘recover or, alternatively, repress forgotten histories’,79 and at what point (if at all) do literal histories become suffused in the collective imagination with the cultural histories to which photographs speak?

While the event can only occur once, the photograph is ‘mirrored to infinity with each new publication … and each new viewing’.80 But the relationship between the index (that which one might assume to be of historical value) and the contingent remains ambiguous. The ‘historical’ photographs that have endured tend not to be those that ‘illustrate historically specific information’ but are rather ‘those that most readily present themselves as symbols of cultural and national myth’.81 The historicity of the photograph seems to hinge not upon any referential documentation of particular events, but rather on a conformity to historical stereotype—as an icon which evokes a broad swathe of generalised historical experience.

In the context of war photography, the images we tend to associate with particular historical conflicts are ‘seldom analysed as informational illustrations of specific events and locations. Rather, they are celebrated on a more abstract plane as broader symbols of

76 Zelizer (1999).
78 Butler (2010), p. 70.
national valour, human courage, inconceivable inhumanity, or senseless loss.' The photographs we tend to historicise stand out precisely because of their ability to dehistoricise the event(s) in question, rendering it a metonym for a broader cultural history.

The paradoxical dehistoricity of the ‘historical’ photograph also opens a dialogue in the meaning of the photograph between the historical particular—the index—and broader contemporary historical frames. As Entman observes, interpretative ‘frames’ elevate the salience of selected aspects of a ‘perceived reality’ in order to ‘arouse or suppress moral and political judgements’. While the denotative aspect of the photograph remains literally fixed across time, its connoted values—contingent, and thus temporal—open the photograph up to reinterpretation in light of prevailing cultural frames: ‘photographs may retroactively become meaningful in relation to new interpretations of past events rather than establish the meaning of those events’. As a result, ‘history and image rearrange themselves as the image produces historical meaning as much as history makes sense of the image’, and the photograph becomes a site around which new and often simplified historical readings of past events coalesce as a tool ‘not of retrieval but of reconfiguration’.

This chapter has outlined the spectrum of theoretical positions on the construction of photographic meaning and effect, and has explored how these relate to the production, reproduction and consumption of war photographs as news objects. Contrary to a widely-held belief in photographic verisimilitude, photographs construct meaning and effect not only through what they visually depict but also through their interaction with external forces which invariably hinge upon the subjective dispositions of those involved in the production, distribution and consumption of the resulting image. Consequently, news images are interpreted as much for what they are perceived to imply—usually in symbolic terms—as for what they literally show. This decoupling of photographic ‘event’ and ‘effect’ is further

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82 Ibid., p. 131.
83 Ibid., p. 140.
exacerbated by the ways in which the news media typically deploy photographs, favouring familiar and undemanding images that ‘symbolise socially shared concepts or beliefs’.88

The following chapters examine the political impact of photographs during the Vietnam War—a pre-lapsarian time when it was believed that a single image really could make history—to examine the extent to which this conditioned media-military relations thereafter, and the effects of the more experimental strategy adopted during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

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2. The Vietnam War and its Legacy

The desire to avoid ‘another Vietnam’, frequently voiced in a range of contexts, is testament to the indelible scar that defeat in the Vietnam War has left on the American imagination.\textsuperscript{89} Forty years after the fall of Saigon, disagreements on a variety of issues persist: What was the overarching strategic goal? Why did America escalate its military commitment? Could the war have been won if things were done differently?\textsuperscript{90} On one issue, however, a degree of consensus exists: that uncensored media coverage played a pivotal role in turning the U.S. domestic population against the war.\textsuperscript{91} As Daniel Hallin notes, belief in the media’s culpability is ‘accepted so widely across the political spectrum that it probably comes as close as anything to being conventional wisdom about a war that still splits the American public’.\textsuperscript{92}

The veracity of the ‘guilty media’ thesis, however, remains a subject of debate. While media coverage was certainly pivotal in relaying negative information about the war to the U.S. population, the claimed direct causal link between this and declining public support is less clear, raising important questions about how photographs and television footage functioned as political vessels. The cultural myth of the media’s agency, however, remains largely intact, and for military authorities it stood as a signal lesson in the potential cost of uncensored media access to the battlefield that would change the ‘fundamental contours of military-media relations’ for the conflicts that fell in its wake.\textsuperscript{93} This chapter examines the role and importance of visual media in the Vietnam War and the legacy it created.


\textsuperscript{90} Carruthers (2011), p. 96.


\textsuperscript{92} Hallin (1989), pp. 105-6.

\textsuperscript{93} Porch (2002), 85.
The war that was ‘declared over by an anchorman’

To say that we are mired in stalemate seems the only realistic yet unsatisfactory conclusion …

The only national way out then will be to negotiate, not as victors, but as an honourable people.94

These were the words with which Walter Cronkite—CBS News anchor and America’s ‘most trusted man’—closed his broadcast on 27 February 1968—words which sent ‘shock waves’ through the government. A little over a month later, President Johnson announced that he would not run for a second term—a decision which, in a speech given to the National Association of Broadcasters, he attributed to television and the ‘effect those vivid scenes have on American opinion’.95 Cronkite’s primetime admonition had seemingly put an end to any extension of Johnson’s presidential career, but for many it represented only the final blow in a sustained pattern: the media had persistently contradicted the more positive view projected by military officials.96 America’s first ‘living room war’ had also been its least successful, most unpopular one, and for many this correlation seemed more than just coincidence.97 As the military saw it, the war had been fought and lost not ‘among sentient bodies in Southeast Asia’ but in ‘images and body counts before Congress and the American public’.98

While television news had been in its infancy during the Korean War, it had entered a ‘golden age’ by the time of Vietnam.99 In 1963, fifteen-minute news bulletins became regularised half-hour evening programmes, swiftly becoming America’s primary source of news.100 Where broadsheet journalism was thought at least capable of providing context and nuance, TV news—as the military saw it—gave a distorted view of the war which prioritised dramatic footage, pushing gruesome images of the worst aspects of the war into America’s living rooms.101 By delivering ‘a far greater emotional charge than its print and broadcast


95 Quoted in Carruthers (2011), p. 105. President Johnson is reported to have said ‘If I’ve lost Cronkite, I’ve lost Middle America’. Quoted in Rid (2007), p. 59.


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[radio] rivals, television ‘harness[ed] public squeamishness … limit[ing] strategic options to the point at which victory became untenable’. After all, as Elegant observes, ‘who could seriously doubt the veracity of so plausible and so moving a witness in one’s own living room?’

Other accounts, however, offer a more nuanced assessment of the impact of television. Hallin’s landmark study finds through detailed content analysis that television coverage was in fact ‘lopsidedly favourable’, and that for a considerable part of the war, the media ‘eschewed exposure of war’s human costs’ and was ‘particularly hesitant to cover atrocities committed by U.S. forces’. According to Thomas Rid, from 1965-70 only 3 per cent of all broadcast news from Vietnam contained footage of ‘heavy battle’ scenes. Echoing Lance Bennett’s ‘indexing’ hypothesis, in which the news agenda is limited to the reflection of sources and viewpoints within official decision-making circles, Hallin argues that it was only when the Vietnam War became a ‘legitimate subject of controversy’ on Capitol Hill that a tangible shift in the tone of coverage surfaced, suggesting that the media responded to growing dissensus as much as it created it.

A similar story unfolds for photography. The Vietnam War saw the emergence of a new political economy of war imagery, driven largely by a growing Western appetite for photographic coverage, and with a corollary visual vocabulary. In part a response to the rising popularity of television, ‘photojournalism evolved certain techniques that emphasised its capacity to document decisive moments’ in a way that moving footage could not. Photographers increasingly sought out frames that symbolised key aspects of the war over event-specific detail. As Liam Kennedy argues, this created ‘an increasingly stylised and often distanced perspective on the war, finding its mise-en-scène in the framing of American

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105 Ibid., p. 106.
110 Kennedy (2007); Moeller (1989), p. 407. The helicopter was a particularly persistent visual motif, and one that resonates in contemporary cultural accounts of the Vietnam War.
men and machinery against inhospitable terrain’, and not in visceral renderings of death and
destruction.\textsuperscript{111}

If, as these accounts contend, the overall field of vision projected during the Vietnam
War was rather more ambivalent than the conventional wisdom would suggest, it is surely
noteworthy that collective memory of it remains structured around a small number of iconic
photographs. What does this tell us about the photograph’s capacity for political effect?

A TELEVISION WAR WITH A CELLULOID HISTORY

For a war dubbed ‘America’s first true televised war’,\textsuperscript{112} it is through still images and not
moving footage that the Vietnam War is collectively recalled.\textsuperscript{113} A small pool of photographs
remain omnipresent in the public imagination, of which four (pictured below) have achieved
particular salience: Malcolm Browne’s ‘The Ultimate Protest’ (also known as ‘Burning Monk’) from
1963; Eddie Adams’ ‘Saigon Execution’, Ronald L. Haeberle’s photograph of the My
Lai massacre, both from 1968; and arguably most well-known, Nick Ut’s ‘Napalm Girl’, taken
in 1972.

\textsuperscript{111} Kennedy (2007); Moeller (1989), pp. 405-6.

\textsuperscript{112} Hallin (1989), p. 105.

\textsuperscript{113} Moeller (1989), p. 392.
Three of these events also exist in film, and yet are far more famous and widely seen as photographs. Footage of the street execution of Nguyễn Văn Lém was seen by an estimated twenty million viewers on its first television broadcast alone, and yet within days it was the impact of the photograph that was said to be decisive.\textsuperscript{114} How have these images assumed such political power?

Hagopian argues that photographs become the ‘common currency of recollection’ because ‘they endure’—their endless reproducibility allows them to be recycled in a variety of contexts, and the more often an image is seen, the stronger its status as a cultural reference point becomes.\textsuperscript{115} But the interminable reproducibility of the photograph cannot explain why some images endure while others fade into obscurity. In the case of Eddie Adams’ ‘Saigon

\textsuperscript{114} Hagopian (2006), p. 212.

\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., p. 214.
The photograph of Nguyễn Văn Lém’s street execution emerged at the height of the Tet Offensive in 1968, as both the war and the anti-war movement reached a crescendo. While the offensive itself was a major military setback for the North, with losses estimated at between 45,000-84,000 men, the gulf it revealed between the U.S. military’s projected narrative of clean and surgical progress—General Westmoreland having declared only three months previously that ‘success lies within our grasp’—and the presence of an estimated 67,000 Vietcong troops across the cities of the South, made it a major strategic victory.

While earlier photographs of a similar incident were seen as anomalous and rejected by the press, Adams’ photograph (fig. 3[2]) was now thought to connote the uncomfortable reality of the war. The salience of Nick Ut’s photograph (fig. 3[4]) is similarly premised on its illustration of dissonance between the official narrative and the unfolding ground situation. As Rid notes, the U.S. public’s ‘psychological and geographical detachment from the grisly realities of guerrilla warfare … found its cynical analogue in the detachment of official language’. It was against the verbal backdrop of ‘inflicting casualties’ and ‘neutralising targets’ that a horribly burned Kim Phúc fleeing a napalm strike showed the human cost of ‘pacification’. In both cases the photographs did not ‘impugn the war on their own’, but possessed an evidentiary quality that ‘ratified uncomfortable truths that [the public] already knew but found it difficult to accept’.

We ought also to be aware of the way these images, and their endless recycling in public political culture—in newspapers, books and magazines; protest placards; and as album artwork, among others—continues to inform our perception of the Vietnam War as an historical event. Just as a photograph’s political clout may hinge upon its aptness to prevailing interpretations at the time, as a historical record its significance is in part determined by

121 Malcolm Browne’s ‘Burning Monk’ appeared on the cover of Rage Against the Machine’s self-titled 1992 debut album Rage Against the Machine.
contemporaneous interpretations.\textsuperscript{122} As competing discourses fade from memory, the fact that the images from the Vietnam War that have endured are also collectively tantamount to an indictment of U.S. military conduct in Vietnam has amplified the perceived importance of the ‘guilty media’ debate. The continued salience of these images is thus simultaneously the product of the conventional wisdom, and yet at the same time reifies it in the mind of the viewer in a cyclical, self-reinforcing fashion.

**LESSONS LEARNED**

The impact of news images during the Vietnam War demonstrates the importance of the discursive ‘frame’ into which news stories and images are received and interpreted. The images that have come to define the Vietnam War in our collective imagination emerged at a time at which the credibility of the military’s narrative of the conflict was beginning to fall apart. It is beyond doubt that these images galvanised growing political opposition to the war, and may in the end have been decisive, but the extent to which they did so independently of other forces remains to be proven. The facticity of the images confirmed ‘uncomfortable truths’, but ones that—echoing Sekula’s position—already existed to some extent in the public imagination.

For military planners, however, the lesson was clear: the media had lost the war. It demonstrated that when fighting ‘optional’ wars (as opposed to wars of national survival),\textsuperscript{123} ‘public opinion is a military operation’s centre of gravity and that media access to the battlefield is a military operation’s critical vulnerability’.\textsuperscript{124} With this came a corollary belief that the press were an adversary and that it would be impossible to maintain public support during future wars with uncensored media access.\textsuperscript{125}


\textsuperscript{123} See Tumber and Palmer (2004), p. 4.

\textsuperscript{124} Stockwell, quoted in Rid (2007), p. 94.

Media-Military Relations in the Shadow of Vietnam

Rid identifies two stages in the evolution of the media-military relationship in the aftermath of the Vietnam War: ‘restrictive’ and ‘experimental’ public affairs.126

‘RESTRICTIVE’ PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Although lacking a comprehensive media strategy, Britain’s 1982 campaign in the Falkland Islands saw heavy censorship and extensive restrictions on media movement, access and transmission—measures based on the ‘myth of Vietnam’.127 Only twenty-nine accredited members of the press set sail with the Royal Navy, already a significant increase from Whitehall’s initial allocation of ten.128 Military efforts to control the flow of information were in part aided by geography: located some 8,000 miles from Britain, journalists were wholly reliant on military satellite communications to transmit their reports back to London.129 There were no ‘live’ transmissions, and material was often subject to arbitrary and unexplained delays.130 By the end of the war, only 202 photographs had been transmitted back to London.131 And in those cases where geographical limitations failed to prevent the transmission of potentially damaging footage, more direct censorship controls were exercised. On one occasion, the Ministry of Defence delayed release of a photograph of the bombing of HMS Antelope by three weeks because ‘Number 10 felt that enough bad news pictures had come out’.132 The information war had been won by an almost total blackout, and provided for the U.S. military a case study in how to tightly control media access to the battlefield.133

Despite discussions between military and media officials in order to agree ground-rules for future cooperation, U.S. campaigns in Grenada and Panama saw the near-total exclusion

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126 Rid (2007).
of the press. In Grenada, despite the gathering of 600 reporters on neighbouring Barbados, no media were present to report Operation Urgent Fury in October 1983—a decision supported all the way up the chain of command, including the president.\textsuperscript{134} Six years later, as U.S. troops invaded Panama in 1989, a similar pattern emerged. Despite the creation of the ‘National Media Pool’\textsuperscript{135} on the back of the 1984 Sidle Commission report—created to review military media policy after news organisations claimed that their treatment during the Grenada campaign violated the First Amendment—journalists found themselves confined to a warehouse and reliant on information provided exclusively by the military.\textsuperscript{136} Although Spanish-language media cited 2,000 civilian deaths and around 70,000 casualties, the perception that prevailed in the United States was one of a swift, surgical operation with minimal bloodshed.\textsuperscript{137}

The 1991 First Gulf War saw the use of the press pool policy again, but on a vastly expanded scale: in Panama the pool had consisted of 8 journalists; more than 1,500 arrived in Saudi Arabia to report the invasion of Iraq, all of whom were obliged to join a hierarchical system of ‘Media Reporting Teams’.\textsuperscript{138} Off-the-record interviews with soldiers were prohibited, military escort at all times was compulsory, and all copy was to be submitted for review and transmission by military authorities—measures which, in the view of the media, amounted to indirect censorship.\textsuperscript{139} The sheer number of reporters also presented a logistical problem for the military. Where remote coastal locations had previously bolstered the ability to seal the ‘information environment’, Iraq’s accessibility and the availability of compact and affordable communications technologies made it increasingly possible for media personnel to work independently as ‘unilaterals’, a factor readily exploited by Saddam Hussein’s invitation to CNN to report from the ground within Iraq.\textsuperscript{140,141} In the event, the swift declaration of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{135} A small, pre-selected group of journalists that could be called in at short notice and used to cover sensitive military operations.
\item \textsuperscript{136} Knightley (2003), p. 485.
\item \textsuperscript{137} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{138} McLane (2004), p. 81; Carruthers (2011), p. 132.
\item \textsuperscript{139} Carruthers (2011), p. 132; Sloyan (1991).
\item \textsuperscript{140} Carruthers (2011), pp. 130-2. The BBC’s John Simpson and ITN’s Brent Sadler, among others, were permitted to join CNN’s correspondent in Baghdad.
\item \textsuperscript{141} ‘Unilaterals’ is the term used to describe media personnel working in a combat zone independent of military oversight.
\end{itemize}
victory meant that the vast majority of those enrolled in the pooling system found themselves far from the ‘hot zone’ for the duration of combat. Instead, the media locus of the war centred on the daily press briefings delivered at the Joint Information Bureau in Riyadh, framed against a backdrop of approved video footage testifying to the unerring precision of air strikes on Baghdad, relayed directly from the ultimate witness—the weapons themselves. Media coverage of the First Gulf War unfolded largely in the realm of the ‘hyperreal’, with only 2 per cent of coverage showing U.S. military casualties. In an example of ‘techno-war perfection’, as Brothers notes, ‘for the most part the image of a painless war of precision held sway because, for the first time in the history of warfare, the conflict was reported from the point of view of the weapons’.

‘EXPERIMENTAL’ PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Coordinating media access to the battlefield was no longer just a question of controlling information flows; it had become a logistical issue as well. Whereas in 1990, CNN and the BBC had a monopoly on the distribution of visual news, new digital technologies significantly lowered the bar for entry and saw a proliferation of new media outlets. ‘The media had become a permanent feature of the battlefield’, and U.S. military authorities began to explore more experimental strategies for their accommodation with potentially synergistic effects.

U.S. intervention in Somalia was in many ways itself an exercise in public relations—a low-risk operation that would allow President Bush to exit the White House in ‘a blaze of glory’, deflecting criticism of his failure to engage in Bosnia. U.S. strategy in Somalia was thus ‘from the start … oriented toward the production of images’, and yielded two valuable lessons for future media planning. The ‘beach incident’, which marked the start of Operation Restore Hope in December 1992, demonstrated the pitfalls of poor media-military cooperation.

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145 Ibid., p. 211.
coordination. As U.S. forces—along with twenty embedded journalists—landed on a beach south of Mogadishu, they were met not by enemy resistance, but by an assembly of international reporters with cameras and floodlights, ready to broadcast the operation to the world.\textsuperscript{149} Although unknown to the soldiers, the ‘beach incident’ had been deliberately orchestrated by military planners in the hope that the coverage would be seen by and undermine the resolve of Somali warlords, while instilling patriotic sentiment with U.S. domestic audiences.\textsuperscript{150} Whether it achieved this is difficult to quantify, but it was widely condemned as a tactical error which jeopardised operational security.\textsuperscript{151}

The following year, images of a U.S. pilot being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu reinforced the importance of maintaining control of discursive news frames. Although in retrospect the incident has been subsumed into a canon of cultural products that present it as illustrative of valour, bravery and courage, its political impact at the time was severe. The Clinton administration was unable to reconcile these shocking images with stated policy goals,\textsuperscript{152} and while the Battle of Mogadishu itself was of relatively little strategic significance, the weight of public outrage brought to bear ultimately led to the announcement of the withdrawal of U.S. forces.\textsuperscript{153} In the absence of an absorptive frame, ‘tactical blunders of little military significance [became] magnified through the prism of the global media … unfolding a political momentum on their own.’\textsuperscript{154}

U.S. participation in NATO’s attempt to expel Yugoslav troops from Kosovo saw a further shift towards an ‘open access’ press policy.\textsuperscript{155} Embedded reporters lived alongside the soldiers and ‘shared the deprivations of army life’ in the hope that this arrangement would ‘produce positive stories and boost morale both for the soldiers in Bosnia and Americans back home’.\textsuperscript{156} However, as the campaign was almost entirely fought from the air, reporters had few opportunities to witness combat first-hand and found themselves with little to report other

\textsuperscript{149} Exact numbers vary greatly: Rid (2007) cites 75, while Carruthers (2011) cites 600.

\textsuperscript{150} Rid (2007), pp. 90-1.

\textsuperscript{151} Ibid., p. 91.

\textsuperscript{152} Stech (1994), p. 5.

\textsuperscript{153} Carruthers (2011), p. 156.

\textsuperscript{154} Rid (2007), p. 95.

\textsuperscript{155} Ibid., pp. 95-6.

\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., p. 96.
than those NATO airstrikes that missed their targets, exacting a civilian cost. Although instances of this were relatively few—less than 1 per cent—it was these stories that occupied the headlines. Isolated tactical blunders assumed strategic importance because of their amplification in the media, something which Milosevic adeptly exploited, transporting reporters to the sites of NATO bombing errors in order to maximise the press coverage these incidents received.\textsuperscript{157} As General Wesley Clark remarked, 'the weight of public opinion was doing to us what the Serb air defence system had failed to do: limit our strikes.'\textsuperscript{158}

The myth of the media’s culpability for U.S. defeat in the Vietnam War inaugurated a lengthy and varied process of experimentation on how best to facilitate media coverage of war without jeopardising operational and strategic objectives. In each of the cases discussed in this chapter, it was ultimately single news events that proved capable of rupturing the broader narrative that the military sought to project, underscoring the importance not only of positive media coverage, but also of the broader discursive frame within which such news events would be interpreted. The scale of the embedding programme introduced for the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and subsequently for ongoing operations in Afghanistan, marked a strident leap forward in this process of experimentation, and saw the boundary between the production of news and the frames into which they were absorbed become increasingly blurred.

\textsuperscript{157} Ibid., p. 97.
\textsuperscript{158} Quoted in ibid., p. 99.
3. Full-spectacle Dominance: Afghanistan and Iraq, 2001-Present

The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq from 2001 and 2003 onwards stand as the longest military engagements in American history. And were one to judge exclusively from the archive of published news photographs that emerged, they also stand among the most benign. Media reports from the British campaign in the Falkland Islands in 1982 and U.S. operations in Grenada and Panama in 1983 and 1989 were arguably more banal, but this was the result of extensive restrictions on media activity. Of the twenty-nine reporters allowed to cover the Falklands crisis, only two were photographers, and it was not until fifty-four days into the seventy-four day war that the first ‘action’ photographs surfaced, a model later adopted for U.S. operations in Grenada and Panama which were characterised by an almost total media blackout.

By contrast, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq stand as the most mediatised conflicts to date. More than 2000 journalists and photographers covered the Iraq war alone, making it ‘the most intensively reported war in history’. Journalists enjoyed a degree of freedom and access to the front lines unseen since the Vietnam War, prompting Donald Rumsfeld to

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160 Stallabrass (2013).


remark, ‘I doubt that in a conflict of this type, there's ever been the degree of free press coverage as you are witnessing in this instance.’ In the opening months of the war, the *New York Times* more than doubled the number of photographs that appeared in its pages.

Yet despite this exorbitant media presence, reporting remained largely consonant with the official narrative promulgated by the military. Despite a costly human toll, published photographs rarely showed casualties, destruction or the Iraqi view, instead offering a patriotic ‘American-centred perspective’. As Stallabrass observes, from the vast archive of visual material produced, ‘arguably none of the professionally made images have come to define the war[s] and the issues around it’. Indeed, the most revealing images we have are those from Abu Ghraib prison, produced by soldiers themselves. How has the visual record of these wars remained so sanitised?

This chapter explores the role of photographs as active sites that have worked to structure our collective apprehension of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. It examines two key aspects: the ‘embedding’ of journalists and photographers, and the repetition of visual tropes in the news media.

‘Embedding’

The cornerstone of the military’s media-management structure from the outset of the Iraq War, and in later years in Afghanistan, was the ‘embedding programme’—the system by which news journalists, reporters and photographers were allocated to an individual company with whom they would remain ‘on an extended basis—perhaps a period of weeks or even months’. Although the concept was not new and had occurred in different ways during World War II, the Vietnam War and intervention in Bosnia, the programme introduced for

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166 Purdum and Rutenberg (2003).
167 Zelizer (2004), p. 120.
168 See Iraq Body Count. ([https://www.iraqbodycount.org](https://www.iraqbodycount.org))
171 Department of Defense (2003a), p. 2. The policy announcement further stated that ‘these embedded media will live, work and travel as part of the units with which they are embedded to facilitate maximum, in-depth coverage of U.S. forces in combat and related operations’.
the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and later in Afghanistan after its demonstrable success, was on a scale hitherto unseen. It was, as Stallabrass declares, ‘the major military innovation of the Iraq war’. 173

Advances in global communications technologies had made it almost impossible for military authorities to directly regulate media content emerging from the battlefield. Technological developments had radically increased the ability of journalists to work independently in remote locations, giving them ‘unprecedented capabilities to file their stories, fast and almost without the military’s logistical support’. 174 This rapid acceleration of the news cycle created what Nik Gowing has termed the ‘real-time tyranny of the present’—a situation in which journalists could outpace the military’s ‘control of the information edge’. 175 This was seen to give news media the upper hand in an environment where the objectives of the media and the military were opposed. Yet the military also recognised that as contemporary warfare had changed, so too had the contours and relative importance of the information environment. The boundary between information operations and public affairs had become more porous, and while some saw greater media autonomy as a hindrance, there was also growing potential for convergence between media coverage and the military’s communications objectives. According to the Department of Defense:

> Media coverage of any future operation will, to a large extent, shape public perception of the national security environment now and in the years ahead. This holds true for the U.S. public; the public in allied countries whose opinion can affect the durability of our coalition; and publics in countries where we conduct operations, whose perceptions of us can affect the cost and duration of our involvement. … Our people in the field need to tell our story—only commanders can ensure the media get to the story alongside the troops. 176

Military planners had ‘come to see the media as an opportunity to exploit, and even as a weapon, rather than a dangerous hindrance to be kept at a distance’. 177 A more experimental and indirect strategy was pursued, premised on maximum dissemination of information and offering ‘largely uncensored access to military operations while strongly encouraging them to

175 Ibid., p. 148.
177 Stallabrass (2013), p. 35.
take a positive view of what they saw.  

775 journalists, reporters, cameramen and photographers embedded across 628 unique ‘slots’ as soldiers crossed the border with Iraq. Slots were offered to a diverse array of media outlets, both within the United States and overseas. 20 per cent of embed slots were awarded to foreign organisations, including Al Jazeera Arabic and Russia’s Itar-Tass news agency, while the remainder drawn from within the U.S. extended beyond the major newspapers and news channels to include organisations like MTV, Rolling Stone, People magazine and Men's Health. 

As Bryan Whitman, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Media Operations, said at the time: ‘I wanted to make sure that we had all forms of media … so we could reach all those audiences out there. [sic]’ How did such a broad programme for media access produce such a circumscribed field of vision?

(DE)LIMITATION

Media personnel embarking upon an embed were bound by a series of ‘ground rules’ which stipulated what was considered ‘releasable’ and ‘non-releasable’ to the public, a decision they were assured hinged only upon operational security. As Victoria Clarke, former Assistant Secretary of Defence for Public Affairs, told media bureau chiefs, ‘the only restrictions we want to put on anything have to do with operational security and the safety of the people involved, including the safety of your journalists.’ Of particular significance to visual journalists were the rules governing the display of wounded and dead soldiers, and damaged or destroyed military vehicles—which gradually tightened. From the outset of the programme, journalists were permitted to cover damaged vehicles and battlefield casualties as long as their identity was protected, or until next of kin had been notified. In 2005, however, two journalists were removed from the programme after the publication of a

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178 Ibid.


180 Purdum and Rutenberg (2003).


184 Ibid. No differentiation is made in the guidance between ‘casualties’ and ‘dead’.
photograph of a bullet-riddled Humvee awaiting repatriation to the United States. The photograph, they were told, violated a new set of rules issued by Army Command in Kuwait.\textsuperscript{185} Later, following the publication of photographs showing mortally-wounded Lance Corporal Joshua Bernard in 2009, the rules were further modified to introduce an outright ban on photographing or filming U.S. soldiers killed in action, and on displaying any identifiable casualties without the service member’s prior written consent.\textsuperscript{186} The shrinking space afforded to visual journalists to record the costs of the war in blood drew the opprobrium of the media as a regressive move backwards from the initial freedoms on which their participation in the programme was premised, and with deleterious consequences for public understanding of the conflict. As Ashley Gibertson, a photographer who completed several embeds for the \textit{New York Times}, remarked, ‘I think that it’s actually denying the historical aspect of what’s happening there … they’re trying to gentrify what’s a very, very ugly thing to be involved in.’\textsuperscript{187}

However, explicit control over media production was not the primary mode through which embedding worked to circumscribe the field of vision. It was not predicated on direct restriction and censorship, but rather on the contingencies of being embedded—what military officials termed ‘security at the source’\textsuperscript{188}. As Butler notes, ‘journalists have increasingly agreed to comply with the exigencies of embedded reporting in order to secure access to the action itself. But what is the action to which access is thus secured?’\textsuperscript{189} Seemingly unrestricted frontline access alongside a particular combat unit belied the extent to which the gaze of the media focussed on what Butler terms the ‘established parameters of designated action’.\textsuperscript{190} To the individual photographer, immersion in the midst of a firefight seemed a total about-face from the opportunities provided during previous wars, and yet when the media output produced is taken as a whole, the extent to which our collective gaze is restricted to the repetition of particular politically expedient subjects and scenes becomes

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext{185}{Strupp (2005).}
\footnotetext{186}{Winslow (2009).}
\footnotetext{187}{Ashley Gilbertson, interview in Stallabrass (2013), p. 103.}
\footnotetext{188}{Department of Defense (2003a).}
\footnotetext{189}{Butler (2010), pp. 65-6.}
\footnotetext{190}{Ibid., p. 64.}
\end{footnotes}

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apparent. As Campbell argues, responding to the late Tim Hetherington,\(^{191}\) the ‘totality of visual knowledge [was] produced by a community of practice’.\(^{192}\) While not the same as dictating a storyline, the ‘embedded perspective’ ‘interpret[s] in advance what will and will not be included in the field of perception’\(^{193}\) in a way that ‘effectively structur[e]d the visibility of the war [to] foreground competing American military interests.’\(^{194}\)

PERSPECTIVE DISTORTION\(^{195}\)

Critics of embedding typically cite two key ways in which it has hindered objective and rounded media coverage of war. The first is myopia: the perspective available to an embedded journalist or photographer creates a ‘soda-straw’ view—one ‘rich in human and tactical detail but poor in abstract and strategic oversight’.\(^{196}\) Although the media had access to press briefings in Washington and the purpose-built Central Command headquarters in Doha, Qatar, news organisations generally ‘failed to fully explore the political and diplomatic angles of the war’, favouring more immersive coverage direct from the battlefield.\(^{197}\) Particular locales—notably Afghanistan’s Korengal Valley, to which many embedded reporters were sent in the later years of that war—have repeatedly surfaced in the news media, and only on exceptional occasions have we seen the conflict from a perspective other than that of coalition forces.\(^{198}\)

The second concerns the extent to which an embedded reporter can maintain objectivity while in such close proximity to the soldiers. As Seymour Hersh, a prominent critic

\(^{191}\) Tim Hetherington was a British photojournalist with extensive experience working in Afghanistan, and co-director, with Sebastian Junger, of the film Restrepo. He was killed by mortar fire in Libya in 2011.

\(^{192}\) Campbell (2009).

\(^{193}\) Butler (2010), p. 66.

\(^{194}\) Campbell (2009).

\(^{195}\) In photography, perspective distortion is where the appearance of an object becomes warped as a result of the angle and close proximity of the camera.

\(^{196}\) Marlantes (2003); Rid (2007), p. 150.

\(^{197}\) Marlantes (2003).

of embedding, has argued, ‘when you are embedded with a military unit, the inevitable
instinct is not to report everything you see, because you get to know them, they are protecting
you’. 199 ‘Danger … is a great bonding mechanism,’ and as Ronald Paul Larson concedes of
his experience embedded with an engineering support unit, he ‘developed a concern for their
well-being and the reputation of the unit. I didn’t want to report anything that would make
the unit as a whole look bad.’ 200 This manifestation of ‘Stockholm Syndrome’, it is argued,
was exacerbated by an influx of inexperienced reporters. The sheer number of embedded
positions available introduced a new generation of war correspondents to the battlefield, most
of whom had not covered a war before nor had any military experience and were
consequently thought to be more susceptible to bias (only 19 per cent had served in the
military). 201 As George Wilson of the Washington Post sardonically puts it, for many it was a
case of ‘looking around and telling the reader: these are magnificent kids, and I’m here in the
dirt with them’. 202

However, there is also a third more subtle, and yet arguably more significant, way in
which the embedded perspective has worked to structure our apprehension of the wars in
Iraq and later Afghanistan, and in which photography has been especially important. In
addition to creating a largely favourable view of events on the battlefield, the ‘embedded
perspective’ has effected a shift in the frame through which public consumption of these wars
has taken place. Moving away from macro level critical analysis of the strategic and political
dimensions of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the narrative promulgated by the media has
been rooted in the more granular everyday experiences of the individual—the soldiers, sailors
and airmen themselves. Describing the ‘ideal type’ embed to media bureau chiefs shortly
before the beginning of the invasion of Iraq, Whitman stated:

   The ideal situation to me is that you would get an embed opportunity with a unit that’s leaving
   from the United States, you would go with that unit, you would be there through their load-out,
   through their deployment, through their send-offs. You’d follow them into their staging area. You’d
   be with them as they prepare for combat. You’d go into combat with them. You’d march on
   whatever capital we happen to march on with them … You would return to the United States with

199 Quoted in Farrell (2010).
201 Marlantes (2003); Rid (2007), p. 150.
202 Quoted in Marlantes, 2003.
them or to their home base, wherever they might be, and you’d cover the victory parade. That’s embed for life. 203

Whitman details a scope of coverage that extends well beyond the operational theatre and concerned if not primarily, then at least as much, with the travails of individual combat units as it is with political, strategic and operational affairs. The narrative of the ‘war’ is subsumed into, displaced by or told through the experience of the subject(s); the details of the event overshadowed by the human interest story. In an example of what Hall describes as the ‘displacement or mystification of the political event through the category of the subject’, 204 the viewer is invited to engage through pathos with pre-existing and ideologically-loaded frames resonant with imagined American values rather than the specificities of the Afghan and Iraqi theatres.

Photography has been instrumental in sustaining this interpretative frame. Perspective is unavoidably implicated in the construction of a photograph—the camera exists in a spatial relationship with the scene, and by viewing the photograph, our collective gaze assumes that of the camera. Mass visual participation in these conflicts has thus occurred largely from a perspective explicitly aligned with or alongside coalition forces, and as Butler argues, seeing is ‘tacitly understood as linked with the occupation of a position and, indeed, a certain disposition [towards] the subject itself’. 205 ‘Thank you for allowing me to sit with my son as he crossed the desert in Iraq’, read an email received by CNN anchor Aaron Brown, 206 ‘Instead of thinking of these guys as G.I. Joes and Robocops, you get to meet them and see they are young guys and girls just like the folks who are watching,’ remarked Dave Sirulnick, the executive in charge of MTV News. 207

Two examples will be considered, one—an amalgam of four individual images—chosen as broadly representative of much embedded photography (particularly from Afghanistan), and the other a more notable and widely-reproduced single image, deemed by some to have ‘turned iconic’. 208

206 Ibid.
207 Ibid.
What Does War Look Like? Photography and the Management of the Field of Vision

Fig. 4: ‘Afghanistan Valley of Death’. Infantry take their positions during a sudden attack by Taliban on Badel Combat Outpost in eastern Afghanistan, near the Pakistan border. 29 December 2010. (All © Rafiq Maqbool/Associated Press)

Fig. 4 shows four frames shot during a firefight at a combat outpost in eastern Afghanistan. Photographed at head-height, and largely from against the sandbag fortifications, they are immersive, exciting, visceral. They speak to the viewer in the subjunctive—‘it was as if I was there,’ in the midst of the firefight alongside the soldiers depicted in the images. While Maqbool’s images purportedly show a hasty response to a ‘sudden attack by Taliban … in eastern Afghanistan’, the frames themselves bear no denotative data that corroborates this. The enemy against which the soldiers are fighting is both invisible and unknown, rendered outside the frame and yet with an implicit presence; and without the location provided in the captions, the images are geographically anonymous.

The photographs denote only a fragmentary glimpse of soldiers in action, but we extrapolate an imagined corpus—a simplified and ideologically-loaded view of the war—characterised by soldierly valour, inhospitable terrain, and an elusive vaporous enemy.

See Zelizer (2010) for more on the ‘subjunctive voice’ of the photograph.

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Fig. 5, a now widely-reproduced photograph by David Guttenfelder, appeared above the fold on the front page of the *New York Times* on 12 May 2009. It shows three soldiers stationed at Firebase Restrepo\(^\text{210}\) ‘fighting the Taliban’, one of whom—Specialist Zachary Boyd, on the left—appears in full combat gear above the waist, but in flip flops and pink ‘I ❤ NY’ boxer shorts below. As Daryl Lang, then editor of Photo District News, remarked, ‘it’s a well-shot, well-composed photo that tells a story in about two seconds’.\(^\text{211}\) But what story does it tell?

It presents to the viewer the war in its simplest form, as ‘us’ versus ‘them’. The photograph is of two dissonant halves, segmented by the fortifications: one cold, professional and enemy-facing; the other intimate and personal. Significantly, the latter is only visible to us—the viewers—and denied to the enemy, whom we cannot see but presume to be ‘out there’ beyond the bulwark, aligning our gaze with that of the soldiers depicted. It also plays to the

\(^{210}\) The subject of Tim Hetherington and Sebastian Junger’s 2010 documentary film *Restrepo*.

\(^{211}\) Quoted in BagNewsNotes (2009). Original article no longer available.
imagined archetype of the American soldier—evoking bravery and camaraderie, coupled with a charming and very human fallibility.\textsuperscript{212} And it reminds us of the difficult and dangerous conditions that service members face, but with sufficient humour to arouse a pleasurable pathos rather than political critique. As Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates remarked of the image, ‘just imagine seeing that—a guy in pink boxers and flip-flops has you in his crosshairs—what an incredible innovation in psychological warfare.’\textsuperscript{213} The photograph again acts as an ‘index of an ideological theme’,\textsuperscript{214} transcending its surface contents to connote an impression of ‘war’ resonant with imagined American values. Comments made on the website of the \textit{New York Times} are illustrative:

\begin{itemize}
  \item It shows the reality of war. … Personally, I think every pro-war chickenhawk should have this picture at their bedside so they realize what true war is about.\textsuperscript{215}
  \item From one photo we examine the youth of our soldiers, the dedication, the patriotism. … While I may not be fond of the war, I am very fond of our troops, and I find myself tearing up as I write this. My father was in World War II … when I saw the picture, I thought to myself, this is something Daddy would have done. I can give no greater compliment.\textsuperscript{216}
  \item They sacrifice so much over there … I believe it [the photograph] shows everything that’s great about this country of ours.\textsuperscript{217}
\end{itemize}

The ‘embedded perspective’ has worked not only to render certain aspects of the conflict more visible than others, but also to recalibrate the interpretative frame through which news images are processed by the viewer. Public consumption of war news has taken place primarily through the category of the subject, and indexes a recurrent ideological theme over empirical information about the news event itself. This sustained focus invites emotional rather than critical engagement, and has usurped the space in which an otherwise more critical analysis of events might have taken place in the public imagination.

\textsuperscript{212} BagNewsNotes (2009).
\textsuperscript{213} Quoted in Dunlap (2009).
\textsuperscript{214} Hall (1981), p. 238.
\textsuperscript{215} Comment by ‘greg in las vegas’, 23 May 2009, 4:18 pm, on Dunlap (2009).
\textsuperscript{216} Comment by ‘Joan’, 22 May 2009, 12:05 pm, on Dunlap (2009).
\textsuperscript{217} Comment by ‘Masha’, 22 May 2009, 11:40 am, on Dunlap (2009).
Visual Tropes in News Photography

We cannot fully account for the muted field of vision of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars without also considering the agency of the media in the selection and deployment of photographs in the news. Zelizer has argued that when covering ‘unsettled’ events (including wars), the media exhibit a preference for familiar images thought to symbolise socially shared concepts and beliefs over those rich in event-specific detail. In addition to the ‘subjectification’ of news frames discussed, visual coverage of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq has also seen the frequent repetition of visual tropes resonant with particular ideological frames.

Unlike an icon, which extrapolates a broader symbolism and political energy through the capture of a decisive historical moment, visual tropes are characterised by their homogeneity.\textsuperscript{218} They operate, in Hariman and Lucaites’ words, as variations on primitive ‘states of social intelligibility’.\textsuperscript{219} Through the repetition of particular themes, they reference universal symbols and engage the viewer primarily through emotion, creating a ‘dynamic field within which a significant range of emotional experience can be directed, intensified, and constrained’.\textsuperscript{220} In the context of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the repetition of ‘ideologically pre-structured’ images has projected a grossly simplified metanarrative rooted in binaries—civility and barbarism; freedom and oppression—which transgress these particular conflicts and reflect an ideologically-driven self-image of America’s ‘place’ in the world.

THE VEILED MUSLIM WOMAN

Women, alongside children, feature prominently in the visualisation of precarity.\textsuperscript{221} Their changing circumstances are ‘increasingly taken as an index of the democratisation and development of a society’,\textsuperscript{222} and women’s rights figured prominently in the justification offered by the Bush administration for intervention in Afghanistan in 2001. ‘The brutal oppression of women is a central goal of the terrorists’, declared First Lady Laura Bush in a radio address to the nation.\textsuperscript{223}

\textsuperscript{218} Zarzycka and Kleppe (2013), p. 979.
\textsuperscript{219}Hariman and Lucaites (2008), p. 59.
\textsuperscript{220} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{221} Kozol (2014), p. 197.
\textsuperscript{222} Sreberny, quoted in ibid., p. 197.
\textsuperscript{223} Quoted in ibid., p. 196.
At the time of the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, the veiled Afghan woman emerged as a prominent visual trope in news photography—particularly striking given the near-total absence of female soldiers in war photographs, which project a masculine American self-image. While such photographs typically possess little event-specific data, the ‘burqa-clad’ woman functioned as a metonym—a crass form of Orientalist shorthand for Western political anxieties about the violent potential of Islam. The trope prefigures its veiled female subject

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as a ‘victim of Islam’ in need of a saviour, and as Rajan argues, it gained currency in the West because of its ability to quickly qualify certain political regimes as ‘radical’. 226

In the months after the fall of the Taliban, however, a new visual genre emerged. Women became pictured not as ‘victims’ but as ‘newly constituted citizens’—a remaking of their public role that correlated with the stated war aims of the U.S. administration. 227 In both cases, the lived experience of diverse populations of Muslim women was homogenised for incorporation into simplistic political discourses. The picturing of veiled Muslim women in the news hinged not on any particular event, but on its intertextual resonance as a perceived symbol of oppression. Our gaze onto the political struggles of Afghan women existed through a decontextualised Western ‘feminist’ lens, forcing upon the viewer not only a particular narrative about human rights progress in Afghanistan, but also a broader assertion about what ‘constitutes the social world in which women have “rights”’. 228

The collected photographic output of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan exhibits a number of striking features. The ‘embedded perspective’ literally positions the viewer alongside coalition forces, focussing on the experiences of the subject. Visual information about the event and its geographic location, however, is typically scant: in many cases, the presence of ‘the enemy’ is implied rather than explicit; and focus on the subject—often as metonym—so close that the image is geographically anonymous. The link between ‘event’ and ‘effect’ is almost totally severed. Instead, they become politically transformative by resonating symbolically with pre-existing and ideologically-loaded discursive frames, of which they are simultaneously productive and through which they structure public apprehension of these wars. This has marked a shift from the regulation of content to a more total circumscription of the field of vision in both literal and semiotic terms that seeks to engage the viewer primarily on the level of emotion at the expense of reasoned critique.

226 Ibid.
228 Ibid., p. 203.
Conclusion

This dissertation has applied a cultural studies approach to the analysis of war photography in order to understand how photographs have worked to structure public apprehension of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq in a manner consonant with official discourse. The utopian ideal photojournalism holds for itself in theory and its role in practice are evidently disparate. The assumption that the photograph’s indexicality unproblematically grants access to the event is found wanting. Photographs do not function as objective ‘windows’ onto the world, and the line between public exposure and political impact—between ‘event’ and ‘effect’—is disordered by contingent factors. Photographs exceed their indexical function to evoke a broader swathe of contingent ideas which are drawn from and interact with prevailing cultural knowledge and dominant discursive frames, and are ‘inextricably implicated in the constructive process of discourse formation and maintenance’.

The Photograph at War

Wars are invariably accompanied by the more frequent and prominent display of photographs in the news. When covering unsettled events, the media turn to photographic realism to provide ancillary information and authenticate their version of events in the mind of the consumer. But a greater number of photographs does not necessarily provide more information, and the assumed facticity of this ‘turn to the visual’ belies the extent to which war photographs ‘prime and reinforce prevailing news narratives’ instead of contributing new visual information.

230 Zelizer (2004), p. 120.
Although the myth of photographic verisimilitude privileges the denotative quality of the news photograph, the capacity for political effect resides at least as much in its ability to connote things that exceed its surface contents. The war photographs that reach public circulation often do so because of perceived symbolic rather than indexical power, prioritising schema over detail, and function as ‘pegs’ to broader ideologically-loaded metanarratives of war. This trend is exacerbated by an increasingly prevalent visual vocabulary among photojournalists which favours ‘fragmentary eventfulness’ over coherent narrative, and a preference among picture editors for resonant images over newsworthy ones. These factors have produced a visual exposition of war that is less concerned with the relay of event-specific information, and instead focusses on the production and distribution of images that work as allegories, symbolically encapsulating romanticised ideas about ‘what war is’.

When we think of ‘war photography’ we recall a selection of iconic photographs which have endured. The field of vision created during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq falls in stark contrast to this, and is characterised not by the presence of indelible single frames, but by sustained sensory bombardment of repetitive and undemanding images. Event-specific visual detail is scant: in the absence of scenic context they become geographically anonymous (while politically and geographically distinct, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have become visually coterminous), the explicit perspectival alignment of the ‘embedded’ photograph has rendered the enemy invisible, though always menacingly implied; and the human and economic costs of war are almost completely absent. In its place, an almost exclusive focus on the figure of the soldier has ‘individuated’ the narrative of the war promulgated in the media, concentrating it not on events but on the experiences of the soldiers—symbols of patriotism, valour, bravery, sacrifice and an American ‘humanity’—‘mystifying’ the political event. Visual tropes in published news photography have similarly worked to foreground reductive ideological binary interpretations at the expense of empirical information, in which

233 Close-ups of hands gripping chainlink fencing provide a recent example from the Calais migrant crisis.
the trope of the veiled Afghan woman as a metonym for a range of Western anxieties about Islam has been particularly prominent.

This corpus of imagery is one in which the link between ‘event’ and ‘effect’ has been almost totally severed, projecting a ‘perceptible reality’ that sustains a ‘dominant representational paradigm with regard to the role of the USA and its military in world affairs’. The ability to wage war hinges upon a successful conscription of the domestic population, and the subordination of the visual field to military goals has been pivotal in achieving this. While we tend to prioritise the materiality of weaponry, ‘the directly destructive instruments of war … cannot operate without the image’ because the image ‘prepar[es] and structur[es] … public understanding of what war is’. The photographs from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have reinforced rather than ruptured official discourse, producing a field of vision that ‘prime[s] viewers towards certain dominant discourse paradigms and frames of interpretation’.

This ‘strategically narrowed’ visualisation of the battlefield has significant consequences for public apprehension of distant wars. Most obviously, it impedes the maintenance of a healthy and contested public sphere. If, as Butler has argued, our ability to articulate political analyses ‘depends upon a certain field of perceptible reality having already been established’, then the selective carving up of historical experience in a visual archive that speaks primarily through symbol to mythologies rather than as an index of events has certainly inhibited potential critique.

In the longer term, it also raises important questions about how the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq will be historically recalled. As Hoskins has argued, the ‘fluidity of digital and digitised visual content … transforms the “infrastructures” of information and archives from which memory and history are made’. While digital communications technologies have

240 Ibid., p. xvi, xv.
243 Ibid., p. 131.
244 Butler (2010), p. 64.
bred an array of new platforms for the interaction of picture and text alongside one another, they also permit the ‘disembedding’ of an image from its written context. The existence of an exclusively photographic archive of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan so heavily mired in symbol has major implications for the historical recollection of these wars.

Conceived of as historical indices, photographs are clearly an imperfect medium for the study of history. But conceived of as a political instruments and studied obliquely for their intended effects, photographs become more revealing. Despite its status as a recording technology, the professional photographic representation of war remains firmly sublimated to the established discourse of the military and state. Consequently, as Brothers argues, ‘the evidence of greatest historical interest lies less in what the photograph literally depicts than in the way it relates to and makes visible the culture of which it is a part’. Does the field of vision produced during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq offer us a window onto history? Yes, but it is a window that looks onto American national mythology, with which both military engagements and the wider ‘War on Terror’ are inextricably bound.

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**Fig. 7:** Screen capture of Google image search results for 'War in Afghanistan', 21 July 2015.

**Fig. 8:** Screen capture of Google image search results for 'War in Iraq', 21 August 2015.
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