The art of war in the twentieth century

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The humanity of war and pictures

Human beings can be distinguished from all other animals by several attributes: among them are that we make war with manufactured weapons and we create pictures on artificial or natural media. Both qualities are best studied—as is done in this exhibit—as combined rather than as separate phenomena.

First, war, as the philosopher Heraclitus asserted, is the father of all things. Few national borders were determined by compassion and altruism; most people live on land that their ancestors seized from others by violence. Many of our technologies, including the Internet, were created for the purposes of war or "defense"; some of our cherished political ideals, such as those of democracy and the "welfare state," are traced to the demands and outcomes of war.

At the same time human beings are visually oriented. Ninety percent of the data we process about the world arrives through our eyes. Not coincidentally do we associate the first manufactured visual pictures, revealed in the cave paintings of Franco-Cantabria (*c.* 20-30,000 years ago), with the rise to dominance on the earth of anatomically modern humans. Since then we have always made images to glorify, record, decry, explain and honor war.

So can we speak of a distinctive art of war of the twentieth century? Marc Bloch, the French historian murdered by the Nazis, warned against "hecto-history," the artificial dividing of great human processes into 100-year blocks. Yet the previous century did contain or culminate in some of the most important developments in both the history of war and its portrayal in images.

Primarily, war and images became in the twentieth century—unlike in any other era of human existence—both products and reflections of mass industrial mechanization. Perhaps other centuries saw more people die in war, but no century produced as many *pictured* deaths of people killed by machines and their masters. Unsurprisingly, historians have variously called the twentieth a "century of blood," a "stinking" century, the "Black Century," and the century of "total war." There were two "hot" world wars and one "cold" one. In addition hundreds of lesser conflicts—relatively so, since millions have died in them—have raged and still do in every part of the globe. The scale of death from war from 1901 to 2000 is hard to visualize in our mind's eye. It would take at least 4,000 monuments like the present-day Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C. to inscribe the names of each victim.

In addition the twentieth century allowed us to witness war "from our living rooms," as the saying went during America's war in Vietnam. In the 1880s the illustrator Albert Robida startlingly predicted this phenomenon, showing a bourgeois European family watching on some sort of home visual film screen far-off battling horse- and camel-riding tribesmen. In the twentieth century such scenes became a mass communication product (the still photos, films, video, and digital pictures of photojournalism) delivered by cameras, print media, televisions and computers to mass audiences. The time it took for such visions to arrive in our houses decreased over the course of the century. During World War II, for example, film was shipped home for editing and publication, a process that might take months. Joe Rosenthal, the photographer who took the famous *Raising the Flag at Iwo Jima* image, did not see his final print until many weeks later. In Vietnam it required about a day to get "film in the can" back to New York or Paris for development and onto the evening news or the front page. Satellites and video and then digital technology and web cams now allow transfer of "live from Ground Zero" imagery as it happens to the home-front viewer. Being "first" (even by seconds) with the most sensational images of war became the holy grail of modern photojournalism.

Lastly, war art was not wiped out by the machine gun. Despite the mass industrial nature of war and of picture-making, the traditional arts (painting, drawing, carving, sculpture) still retained the ability to critique war, though in novel ways and to different audiences. They no longer sought the utmost fidelity of scene, as did the oil paintings of previous eras: instead they aimed to interpret war through emotion and fragmentation. Simultaneously, the new electro-mechanical and digital images of war did not remain simply commodities: many entered the museum as venerated and profitable art objects or "icons." As artists of the war image, war photographers became as respected as any Renaissance master.

Picturing war before the twentieth century

In the Neolithic, we have the first definite images of interhuman combat and warriors: tribesmen with spears and arrows engaged in battles and personal duels. Spain, notably, boasts some of the best depictions of the "new" war art, such as that of the Gasulla Gorge in Castellon. But similar incarnations are found in India, Africa and Australia. At these early dates we recognize "leaders" distinguished by body size, headdress, and different positions and equipment. Familiar tactics are here too, such as encirclement, flanking, charges, skirmish lines and ambush. Violence is omnipresent.

For our purposes, the entire pre-photographic "civilized" era of warfare (from the pharaohs to Waterloo) can be compressed to a few observations. Generally, images of war were servants of state power and the vanity of

warlords—again, often in contradiction to the truth. Ramses II adorned his mausoleum with images of himself as a giant, smiting miniaturized Hittites at Kadesh (c. 1300 BCE). Yet, we know that the battle was a draw, at best. Assyrian kings would portray themselves as ever-victorious, even in times of defeat, in their bas-reliefs, and decorate their palaces with scenes of massacre to intimidate potential rivals and foreign ambassadors. Roman generals, given a triumphal parade, would ride their chariots into the Eternal City flanked by slaves holding up paintings depicting the battles that brought them fame. It is generally not until the Renaissance that we have the first secular critiques of war—horrors of war as disgrace, not boast—and also the exalting of the common soldiers.

But the imperial impulse persisted. In a famous exchange, Napoleon, the hard-headed emperor, castigated his favorite artist, Jacques-Louis David, for ennobling the vanquished Spartans of Thermopylae. His argument: "David, you will tire yourself out painting the defeated." Napoleon, like all the god-kings before him, insisted on *La Gloire* in paint and stone and bronze.

The era of prints and painting was not wholly a "Romantic" period in the depiction of war. Certainly there were innumerable pictures of dashing cavalry charges, handsome portraits of long-mustached hussar officers, and noble "death of" scenes. Yet Jacques Callot and then Francisco de Goya and others showed the useless, ignoble and dirty facets of the enterprise.

By the mid-nineteenth century the invention of photography had arrived, allowing the artist to stand near the warrior and "capture" the vista of war and, with the later innovation of the "negative," produce innumerable copies of that image for the masses.

However, old restrictions applied here too. For the first war photographed, the Crimean War (1854), we have mainly sittings and posings—that was all the generals would encourage or tolerate. The American Civil War provided the initial real images of battlefield death and horror. In a famous 1863 essay, jurist and philosopher Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote in the *Atlantic Monthly* of his reaction to photographs of the dead at Antietam: "Let him who wishes to know what war is look at this series of illustrations." The public, however, could at first view actual photographs only at exhibitions or in *cartes de visite*. Newspapers could only print engravings or woodcuts inspired by photographs, which were then often highly edited. Neither could the early cameras capture motion; battles could not be shot in progress.

New technologies contributed to what we recognize as film photography and photojournalism. The Second Boer War (1899-1902) did yield some films for the home-front British audiences. The short films

Skirmish Round the Flag and *The Sneaky Boer*, though, were fakes filmed in England. It was not until the early part of the twentieth century that mass publics would see still photography and films from the battlefronts.

The twentieth century revolution: war and pictures mechanized

We may mark the twentieth century's distinctive features in war and war pictures as commencing with the guns of August of 1914. World War I seemed to survivors of its fury to be a culmination of all war technology: fleets of steel battleships; combat in the air and under the sea; the triumph of the machine gun; railroads as arteries of mobilization and deployment; metal monsters roving the land (curiously called "tanks," in a British subterfuge to make the enemy think their new secret weapon was a storage device for water). The colossal scale, too, seemed unsurpassable: entire nations mobilized; armies in the tens of millions; battles in far-off corners of the world.

The art of war was profoundly affected. Many thought that the mass slaughter and the mass imagery had not only killed off the optimistic spirit of Western civilization, but had also murdered the idea of "war art" itself. Battles fought at twilight on moonscapes with machine guns and artillery did not lend themselves to the sensibility and tactility of realistic oil painting. The subjects themselves were drabber and shabbier: modern armies dressed for cover, not color. The cavalry charge—indeed the mass charge of soldiery itself—was suicide. Heroes were invisible in the mud and blood and fog. Lady Butler, the general's wife who was famous for her heroic canvases, was appalled by the butcher's bill of the Western front in the first months of the war and immediately understood that her era was dead. "Who will look at my *Waterloo* now?" was her rhetorical question. Realism was the order of the day.

But what kind of realism? The photos and films of the war were unremarkable except for their blandness. The discordance that was often presented between the realities of war shown to the public and those suffered in the field was made more stark and more widely known. Censorship—total and stifling—was the practice among all belligerents. The public saw camp scenes, men going "over-the-top," tidy marches, generals pointing at maps, politicians shaking hands, and little else in the newspapers, magazines, and movie reels of the time. Few battles were shown in any detail: little suffering and death, only some material devastation. The rot-trenched hell that an entire generation of European youth died in was snipped or boxed out of visual culture.

The exceptions were propaganda pictures of enemy atrocities: some based on reality, others wholly faked. After the war, of course, Hollywood, in tune with the times, began to make "anti-war" films like *All Quiet on*

the Western Front that fixed the image of the trenches as abattoirs.

But most important for the genre of war art itself, the photograph and the film (news, documentary, and fiction) were now the main definers of the "reality" of war. True, production of "oil art" and statuary of the war did not slacken. (It persists, officially and unofficially, to this day.) "Last gunner firing" painting groups and the bronze of *Canada's Golgotha* won public admiration. Also, traditional arts have remained dominant in the memorials of war. Every village in France, for example, has a statue group or obelisk commemorating its World War I dead.

But in truth the non-specialist can name only a handful of post-1914 images of war that are within the traditional media of canvas, metal or stone. This writer's students, when pressed, could name only one painting of war for the entire century: *Guernica*. No wonder that non-photographic artists have essentially surrendered the old right of painting, that of the "realism of oil," to the new media. The painters (and many sculptors) of the new century sought novel ways of rendering and interpreting the ideas and emotions of war.

We may now speak of the twentieth century as the era of the industrialization of war, warriors and art. Interestingly, the mass audience found new appreciation of the mass-mobilized warriors. The common soldier became a protagonist in story and art. No twentieth-century general could refer to his men, as did Wellington in the previous century, as the "scum of the earth." The ordinary soldier, still cannon fodder in practice, was treated as a hero and was a common subject for the camera, from the frontlines of Verdun to Stalingrad, to Hue, and to Kuwait City and innumerable Hollywood films. Indeed, the picturing of the death of the individual soldier, once a genre only accorded to warlords, is now the subject of concentrated media attention, at least in the West.

For example, in February 1969 *Life* magazine published 217 portrait photographs of Americans who had been killed in one week of fighting in Vietnam. The faces startle us with their incongruity of setting and visage: most of the soldiers are posing in clean and pressed military uniform, smiling, resolute, the incarnation of the strength of our youth. No surprise then that Western publics now chafe at the number of casualties in war that a Napoleon or a World War I general would think inconsequential. Perhaps the heroicization of the noncommissioned man (and woman) through close-up photography has increased the value of individual life—if not for an enemy, at least for our own warriors.

The truth of war images

Another recurring feature of twentieth century war imagery is the debate over "truth." The camera mimics some of the natural processes of the

human eye—thus we perceive that a photograph is more realistic than, say, a Cubist drawing. Yet realism has its codes, too. Makers of "nonfiction" films, for example, regularly insert stock footage to substitute for specific references in the narration without informing audiences of the difference. As the great American photographer Albert Streichen said, "Photographs can't lie but liars can photograph." Perhaps it is better to state, as did the art historian Ernst Gombrich, that *pictures cannot lie in the same way that words can*. We do not say, for instance, that great fiction-based-on-fact war films like *The Longest Day* are lies because they show John Wayne fighting on a Normandy beach. On the other hand, we would judge it a lie if we were told that the movie was the original battle captured on film of the time. Or, if a picture of a corpse-filled ditch, captioned "Dead Hutus Killed by Tutsis in Burundi," is recaptioned "Dead Tutsis Killed by Hutus in Rwanda," one or both sets of words may be partly or wholly false. The photographed human beings, however, remain just as dead. The picture, too, is the same; it is only the context of interpretation that has changed.

Yet truth mattered in the previous century as much as in this one. This was and is seen in controversies about famous war icons. During the Spanish Civil War, Robert Capa, the century's most celebrated war photographer, shot his *Dying Spanish Militiaman*. Although the world would see many "dying soldier" images in the years and wars to come, this is the one most widely known. Immediately, however, there were allegations that the event was staged—a stunt for the camera. But subsequent scholarship, in tracing records of the events and looking at Capa's original negative roll, proves that it was an authentic "captured moment of death." Faking, of course, was common: all armies in World War II, for example, staged propaganda images. Many of the famous "war shots" repeated today in collections and history books were enactments.

Photo manipulation was, of course, not unique to the twentieth century. From the early days of photography, its founders discovered that one could "tidy up" an image. Some neatening could take place before the picture was taken. Many photos of the American Civil War included props and re-arrangements of the scenes—even of the dead bodies. Then further changes were made in the transition to newspaper- and magazine-printed engravings and woodcuts.

Today we face a greater challenge in ascertaining what is authentic: most war photographs are shot digitally. There is no negative for some future detective or historian to "check." In the most recent Gulf War a *Los Angeles Times* reporter was fired for being too creative with his Photoshop software; questions were raised about many other images, video and still. The future is ominous in this regard, as the digital "editing" techniques common in Hollywood films become ubiquitous, cheap and simple.

In the century to come, who will be able to detect the difference between photo fact and fantasy?

Perhaps these techno-fantasies point to the continuing need for visual artistry about war. The anti-sloganeered posters created by Barbara Kruger, for example, demand that we stop and think about what we supposedly can see with our eyes. Earlier in the century, painters Gino Severini and Christopher Nevinson reacted to the technologicalization of death in World War I by focusing on the iconoclasm of the machine itself. Is the steel killing mechanism the message of modern war imagery—not the men at all, who are simply its servants or slaves? Félix Vallotton, in his 1917 oil, *Verdun, tableau de guerre interprété*, tried to answer the question, "What can I depict out of all that?", after actually seeing the field of the war's costliest battle. In the painting, man is a nearly invisible bystander; the flashes, smoke and guns are the star players.

Limited visions of war

How much we should be allowed to see is always a controversy. World War II, for example, was visually different to World War I. Censorship during the former was due less to coercion than cooperation. In most cases war photographers voluntarily complied with government requests; they believed that home-front audiences had no interest in seeing their sons lying headless on South Seas beaches. On the other hand, research on public opinion found that many civilians wanted to see more of the sacrifice of the combatants. Paul Fussell, cultural critic and World War II combat veteran, argued that his comrades held "the conviction that optimistic publicity and euphemism had rendered their experience so falsely that it would never be readily communicable...[and was] systematically sanitized and Norman Rockwellized, not to mention Disneyfied." The rules for the American press were "no dead or badly wounded GIs." (It was acceptable, as in a famous *Life* magazine photo, to show incinerated Japanese soldiers.) Near the end of the war this situation changed slightly: Americans saw some dead from the island battles against Japan and a dead American from street fighting in Germany. In the Third Reich the rules were similar, but in desperation in the last years, and in sufferance to Goebbels's policy of "total war," many grim pictures trickled home. Russians saw atrocity pictures featuring civilians killed by the Germans. In many belligerent countries like Japan, however, censorship was heavy-handed. Generally, it was allowable to show the death of the enemy or of people other than one's own countrymen. Despite all this, the war confirmed that battlefront news photographers could be "artists" as well as industrial workers. As in the American Civil War, the best of such images merited museum display as well as becoming popular icons.

In the next half century of picturing war in Africa, Asia, central and eastern-Europe, and the Middle East, another issue arose. Why were we being shown certain wars and not others? The attentive can cite some famous wars of the post-Korea era, from the American War in Vietnam to the Arab-Israeli wars, and the well-known and well-reported genocides, such as those in Biafra and Rwanda. Yet, there have been hundreds of wars since World War II and dozens of major genocides. During the time of this exhibition at least 40 wars rage around the world, although the most informed of us may be hard-pressed to name but a few. Why, we might ask, is the slaughter of one people covered by thousands of cameras, while another people expires in non-televisual and unphotogenic obscurity? It follows that the camera defines the war: you, the reader, can conjure an image in your mind of the slaughter pits of Rwanda but not of those in Tibet. In the Sudan over a million are dead from the civil war between the "Arab" Muslim north and the "Black" Christian south, yet the Sudan has been a minor sideshow to Western lenses. The inequality of war and death in the camera's eye, and thus in the mind of the public, is considerable.

There are no simple answers. Certainly, some countries are the centers of the attention of major-power political leaders; the cameras logically follow their gaze and their deployment of troops. Geography and resources matter. Vietnam was the great "domino"; Biafra was mineral-rich; Somalia was on the horn of Africa controlling the main oil shipping routes; Bosnia was in central Europe; Iraq has oil. Such nations are deemed "strategically" important. But accessibility is another variable. A war on the fringes of Europe can be covered easily (albeit not without danger) but the Chinese government has never allowed foreign cameras to view its conquest and subjugation of Tibet (estimated dead: two million plus). When the government of Syria crushed a Muslim uprising in the city of Hama (20-40,000 dead) only a few still pictures were smuggled to the West. Of course, political factors seem to dominate. To wit, Saddam Hussein killed his own people in droves, but because he was a useful ally against the Ayatollah's Iran, America and the West pointedly ignored atrocity images from Iraq of slaughtered Kurdish babies.

The twentieth century was also the time when the creation and dissemination of pictures of war became a giant industry. Simply put, the maw of news must be fed, and striking photos of war and violence are a lucrative commodity. Indeed, a rarely studied feature of war photojournalism icons is their significant monetary value. Picture rights alone will accrue hundreds of thousands of dollars over time. Careers are made, too, for the picture shooter who bags the icon. The premium put on "getting the money shot" or "shooting the Pulitzer" makes for unappetizing off-camera anecdotes. Rakiya Omaar, a Somali and the

former executive director of Africa Watch, noted: "Anyone who has watched a Western film crew in an African famine will know just how much effort it takes to compose the 'right' image... they rush through crowded corridors, leaping over stretchers, dashing to film the agony before it passes...When the Italian actress Sophia Loren visited Somalia last month, the paparazzi trampled on children as they scrambled to film her feeding a little girl." Hers is a common observation, although in fairness one must concede that many news journalists feel their duty is to help, not to hurt or to shoot and run.

How did pictures of war affect war?

For the student of the art World War II raised of war another question that we still struggle with today. If we are allowed to see the horrors of war, how do they affect us? Do they desensitize us, excite us, dull us to inaction or spur our outrage? Does their propagation, as war leaders worry, undermine support for war? Research on this subject provides an ambiguous and sobering answer: it all depends on who is watching what is done to whom.

It is often stated that, for example, the Hitler regime, like Stalin's henchmen, kept their mass killings of Jews, Poles and others off-camera, and thus secret. This was true in formal terms: there were severe proscriptions that no films or pictures were to be made of death camps or mass shootings of civilians. Yet, these images were made anyway, some by officials. Ironically, many images of the Holocaust that today appear in museum exhibitions and memorializing picture books were, in fact, mementos taken by German soldiers and even, incredibly, concentration and death camp guards. These pictures were sent home and circulated. The Japanese depredations in China were thus documented as well. (There are many other such cases: in Cambodia, for example, the Khmer Rouge genocide was recorded only by the perpetrators' own pictures of their victims.) Sympathy, it seems, is in the eye of the beholder, and one man's atrocity photo is another's delightful tourist souvenir or bureaucratic notation.

We may make the same point about the "effects" of the war image, even famous ones. Consider *Guernica*. Perhaps the picture affected individual minds. It is also argued that its return to Spain was a symbol for national reconciliation. But did the twentieth century's most famous "anti-war" artwork do anything to impact the war from which it arose? Did any army's fortune wax or wane; did any nation change its policies; was a Basque life spared from the inferno? Research on the influences of icons of war suggest that they may have many powers, from the aesthetic to the economic to the political, but these may not conflate. A picture may be

"powerful" as a picture alone but not in any way affect the course of a war.

This is a troubling thought. Today it is commonly stated that "if there had been cameras at Auschwitz, there would have been no Holocaust." The psychological assumption in such a premise is that we are all equally outraged by horrors perpetrated against other human beings. Study and experience prove this to be a fantastical notion. Certainly the camera can expose a horror that no other medium of art could in the past as quickly or as realistically. Yet, as said, there were cameras at Auschwitz—those of the killers. It is now known that both Western governments and the press were aware that a great slaughter was occurring but chose to ignore it. Anti-Semitism was a factor, but also there was a backlash by many, especially in America, to heavy-handed and sometimes false British atrocity propaganda in World War I.

The Soviet slaughters of their own people, and then the mass rapes in Germany and in Eastern Europe by the Russian armies, were even more off-camera. The president of the United States insisted that all images of "Uncle Joe" Stalin's realm be favorable, whether in newsprint or in Hollywood films. Alexander Solzhenitsyn writes of a gulag guard taunting the prisoners, "You think Europe cares about you?" Well, Europe didn't see the gulags, but we may wonder if Europe (and America) in the thirties and during World War II *wanted* to see them. Likewise, war-weary America had no interest in the killing fields of Cambodia in the late seventies, even if camera crews had been allowed to cover them. Gilles Peress, in another example, may go to Rwanda and capture the charnel pits, and his photographs may make it to the breakfast tables of statesmen and the living rooms of Houston, Tokyo and Pamplona, but the reaction may be, as the title of his book of pictures suggests: *The Silence*. There is much evidence, then, that publics are not spurred to action by watching the slaughter of alien peoples: we go about our daily routine, numbed to such "infotainment."

Conclusion: war and images reconciled

Now we have entered another century. The events of just its first three years offer small hope that the genre of the war image will expire for want of subjects or become a topic too antiquarian for a museum of *contemporary* culture. Governments worry about how to control pictures of war, others seek to profit from them, others suffer as their subjects, and a few try through images to struggle against war. Most of us are silent witnesses to the mass carnage and the mass imagery that political elites and the news industry allow us to see. Some images of war become famous; many are mass commodities; artists with camera and pens and computer keyboards struggle to show what they see of war in front of their faces and in their mind's eye.

Does this past and present allow us to predict the future? We note that humans are very adaptable: we can eat hamburgers, honey, and crickets; we can live in the jungle, ghettos, and the Arctic; we can also love our neighbor and cooperate with him, or we can kill him and steal his goods. All these activities are within our capacity: they include the ability to make war and to make pictures. These are not opposites and are often composites. We are, as Shakespeare put it, angels and killers; but we can also be soldiers and poets, death-camp guards and painters. The future, then, is unwritten; the survival of our species is not guaranteed; but we can be certain that unto the last days we will make pictures to elucidate for ourselves the experience of war.