The Face of Our Wartime

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Abstract
This paper considers a turn toward portraiture amongst contemporary photojournalists who have covered the War on Terror. A series of wartime faces is examined in order to consider the way prolonged conflict flattens our visual landscape. War appears to restrict our palette, effectively diminishing our appetite for that aspect of experience which does not yield directly to sight. The price of this shrinking surface area is a reduction in our ability and willingness to engage and empathize with others.

Keywords: war, photojournalism, portraiture, ethics, gaze

I am the enemy you killed, my friend.
I knew you in this dark; for so you frowned
Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.
I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.

—Wilfred Owen, excerpt of “Strange Meeting”

1Late into the War to End All Wars, the English poet Wilfred Owen staged a remarkable meeting. His imaginary assembly involved two dead soldiers from opposing sides encountering each other in some “profound dull tunnel”—one of the layers of Hell, the first narrator soon realizes. The soldiers exchange dead smiles. They talk. They manage to broach an understanding of a “truth untold” (1918).

It is disquieting to read Owen’s poem from the vantage of the present. The “truth untold” seems no closer to hand than it was at the end of the Great War. Perhaps such an understanding is only ever granted to the dead. But then such a meeting seems almost unthinkable today. As the War on Terror stretches into its second decade, the opportunity for face-to-face encounters seems to have completely receded—even from the plane of the imaginary—as if the human face were itself slowly retreating from our life-world. Perhaps this is what Owen’s poem inversely testifies to: the way war erodes the possibility of really regarding the Other; the way it strips the human person of their face, abrading our very capacity to see and be seen.

This is not to say there has been any lack of visual material. The War on Terror—or more properly, the Wars on Terror—has
produced an abundant harvest of images and a growing body of scholarship to match. Apart from analyzing the content of this visual succession, critique has been aimed at the ways sovereign powers have attempted to delimit what appears in the field of view, controlling the very terms of representability, or the “frames of war,” as Judith Butler (2009) has phrased it. For my part, I would like to articulate a slightly different problem: my interest here is not on what is or is not available to be seen, but rather the way in which this war has affected how we see, indeed, how our very “ways of seeing” are changed in wartime (Berger 1972).

It is difficult to grasp how war—and this war in particular—has affected the human gaze. The difficulty is partly due to the exponential increase in the production of images (and the parallel withering of the moral sensibility which dictates that some things are forbidden to the gaze). The images in circulation are growing simultaneously sharper and poorer. Thanks to the infrared cameras affixed to US Predator drones, some eyes are privy to “perfect pictures” depicting the evisceration of human life taken from miles away (Mayer 2009, 36). At the same time, “poor images”—illicit fifth- or sixth-generation copies with substandard resolution—are uploaded, downloaded, and shared at a spectacular pace (Steyerl 2009). This explosion of material in the visual environment seems to have only increased the appetite for stimulus. Contemporary spectators have become used to gorging themselves on visual information. And this increase has given rise to the idea that public access to information has also expanded. It is hard to say whether this is true. Cases like the Abu Ghraib prison photographs would seem to suggest that there is greater access to visual evidence of crimes of war in the digital era. And even when these crimes are not judged as such by the state, they are made available to the world spectator’s faculty of judgment. These efforts to expand access to information are important (the well-known judicial axiom bears repeating here: “Justice must be done and seen to be done.”). But my aim is to try to describe something else, a rather different sense of “ethics as optics.”

As Owen’s poem implicitly counsels, the issue at hand in wartime is not just a matter of what offers itself up to the field of vision, but rather the particular ways in which the eye seeks meaning in the Other. The poem describes the way war undermines the possibility of a certain kind of encounter—a “strange meeting”—that involves a disruption in the very fabric of what can be presented to the eye. Owen’s delicate face-to-face assembly is not a symmetrical parley. In an analogous way, I am keen to try to recover that dimension of the visual field that cannot be gathered wholly into the gaze—indeed, that actively resists being grasped by the eye. Put another way, I am proposing that our appetite for this other, recalcitrant dimension of visual experience has diminished, that war blunts our palate for those aspects of the human face that are not directly given to sight.

My title is a deliberate play on August Sander’s 1929 book, *Antlitz der Zeit* (translated as *Face of Our Time*). Sander’s project was just one of a series of photographic albums that sought to visually depict the German people during the last years of the Weimar Republic. It emerged in a moment when much significance was found in the expressive features of the face. Physiognomic thinking was en vogue at the time, which is to say there was a common belief that the character of a person was evident in their facial features. Sander added another layer to this discourse; his study attempted to grasp how social and cultural forces left their mark upon the human form. Debate continues as to the political valences of such a project, and there is not time nor space to recount the complex nuances of it here. At one end of the spectrum, physiognomic thinking undoubtedly fed the National Socialists’ fantasies of Aryan racial supremacy. At the other end, politically left-leaning critics like Walter Benjamin...
applauded Sander’s project as a “training manual” for our powers of perception. Benjamin felt that Sander had provided an atlas of instruction for a new, “bold sort of observation” that was akin to Goethe’s method of “delicate empiricism,” which is to say, he believed the photographer had developed a method of looking that awakened not only the eyes but more importantly an inner organ of observation (1931, 520). Like Goethe, Benjamin held faith in the idea that there is much in the visual world that does not yield directly to sight, but which nevertheless exhibits itself to the camera—a dimension he named the “optical unconscious” (1931, 512).

There is a certain paradox at work in using photography—and portraiture in particular—to grasp something beyond what is given to be seen. But it seems worth returning to this vexing question because photojournalists themselves have returned to the genre of portraiture. While our contemporary wartime has not produced quite the same profusion of photo books as Sander’s era, the physiognomic impulse has undoubtedly been revived.

Consider Louie Palu’s 2008 Garmsir Marines or Larry Towell’s 2008–11 Faces of the Taliban. If only one could stage a “strange meeting” between these enemies! Palu took each of his portraits immediately following a patrol in Garmsir District, Helmand Province, Afghanistan. Each of the 15 marines portrayed in the series (save one) gazes directly into the camera. Many of their expressions are dull, by which I mean that the activity of patrolling seems to have dulled these facial masks, stripping them of their expressiveness. Indeed, the ominous phrase written across LCpl. Damon Connell’s helmet suggests that it is precisely not his face that engages the enemy but rather his “front” (see Figure 1). The strange idiom testifies to the ways the human subject is flattened by war; reduced to the homogenized realm of the frontal, a kind of compression to the rule of the screen, all of which is further emphasized by Palu’s deliberately shallow depth of field and horizon-less framing. In this relentlessly frontal domain, the spectator’s gaze, like the marines’, is not allowed to wander. There is no movement, no outside, no course to the internal, and therefore no avenue towards that which ever escapes vision.

Towell’s project Faces of the Taliban, in contrast, includes portraits taken in the field—although they were not, in fact, shot by the photographer himself. Having worked in Afghanistan for several years documenting the long-term devastation of this region, Towell planned to embed with the Taliban, in order, as he put it, to give the rebels a “voice and a place” (Johnson 2012). But after his Afghan contact was forced to flee the country, Towell was urged to abandon his plan. He gave his camera over to a local journalist to capture the portraits in his place. The resulting documents offer a kind of negative proof of the profound difficulty of staging a face-to-face meeting with one’s enemies.

Despite the pictures’ provenance—or, indeed, perhaps because of it—these faces deliberately display an expression of pitted determination amid an unforgiving landscape (see Figure 2). The Taliban movement was born when a relatively small group of Pashtun fighters under the leadership of Mohammed Omar began an internal rebellion, taking control of Kandahar in 1994. This rebellion occurred within a country that has been under threat of foreign occupation for decades (indeed, since the nineteenth century if one includes the Great Game). The US-led invasion in 2001 added another layer to this turbulent history. The Bush Doctrine, as it has come to be called, had a series of stated policy aims, among them to capture or kill Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda militants but also to replace the Taliban government in Afghanistan. In a speech delivered on September 11, 2001, and reiterated several times later, Bush openly declared that his administration had decided to “make no distinction between
States into war) willfully blinded themselves as to the identity of their foes. No distinction was allowed between an “al-Qaeda terrorist” and a “Taliban insurgent.” One interpretation of this statement is that members of his administration (not to mention the countries that followed the United

**Fig 1** US Marine LCpl. Damon “Commie” Connell, age 20, Garmisir, Helmand, Afghanistan, 2008. (Photo by Louie Palu).
Perhaps because of this relentlessly flat wartime environment, arriving at something like a “truth untold” seems to require a calculated imposition on the spectator’s gaze. Nina Berman’s *Purple Hearts* (2004) offers one such avenue. The series portrays US veterans wounded in the Iraq war. Each is photographed in agonizing solitude, whether in their home, in a military hospital, or on a base in the United States. The strategy makes evident the way war divests its subjects of their capacity to rejoin the human community. In many cases the soldiers’ faces are obscured, either by a delicate play of light, or because their flesh has been fused into a painful-looking mask. Sgt. Joseph Mosner, for instance, was wounded in Khalidiya when a bomb blew off his scalp and face (see Figure 4). A blurry microphone in the lower left corner of this frame is the only object that anchors him to the earth. In its unflinching presentation of injury, Berman’s series recalls the “war cripples” of the First World War, and perhaps especially the collection of photographs of horrifically disfigured soldiers from Ernst Friedrich’s 1924 *war cripples*.
without rendering the encounter entirely overwhelming. As Roland Barthes might have said, these images are subversive not because they frighten or repel, but because the staging is pensive (1981, 38). Berman’s series is not a bald antiwar polemic, but it does invite us to consider war as a force before which “man’s flesh shrinks away,” as a force “that turns anybody who is subjected to it into a thing” (Weil 1965, 5).
Sleeping Soldiers (2008). They are just as they sound: a series of pictures portraying US soldiers asleep in their bunks at Korengal Outpost, a location known amongst the troops stationed there as the Valley of Death (Rubin 2010). I first came across the images some years ago when Hetherington’s friend, Stephen Mayes, brought them to my attention. I vividly remember the flash of embarrassment that I felt when I looked at them, and especially when I looked at Sgt. Alcantara (see Figure 5). It is hard to say why I felt so abashed. It must have been one of those situations when, as psychologist Silvan Tomkins put it, “one is suddenly looked at by one who is strange” (cited in Sedgwick 2003, 35). That

![Sgt. Joseph Mosner, 35, wounded in Khalidiya when a bomb blew off his scalp and face, 2004. (Photo by Nina Berman).](image)
might sound odd, given that it was I who was gazing upon the photographs, and they were portraits of sleeping figures. But as Tomkins (and Eve Sedgwick after him) make powerfully evident, shame operates once desire has already been set in motion. One instinctively averts one’s gaze precisely to avoid self-exposure. As odd as it sounds, my gaze felt nakedly visible to these strange, sleeping men. And in this respect the feeling of shame offers evidence of our “uncontrollable relationality.” It is an affect that “aims toward sociability” (Sedgwick 2003, 37). Put differently, it was not only for myself that I felt ashamed; I also felt shame for these men, for their hapless visibility as much as my own. Somehow Hetherington’s photographs exposed each of us—indeed, all of us. Even as the photographs invite spectators into the intimacy and crisis of human contact, they simultaneously generate a kind of charged sensitivity to the boundary between self and other; a regard for the interval between subjects. And just for a moment, the flat wartime field opened up; this strange disturbance of sight offered a glimpse of a wholly different type of vision, one in which human subjects could actually regard one another, face to face.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

**Notes**

1 These thoughts began their gestation during conversations that took place at McGill University’s symposium Conflict[ed] Reporting: War and Photojournalism in the Digital Age I would like to extend my thanks to Thierry Gervais, Peter Maass, Louie Palu, Christine Ross, Tamar Tembeck, and Theodora Tsentas I also learned much from sharing the stage with Nina Berman, Mary Panzer, Tanya Sheehan, and Andrés Zervigón during a panel on Documentary Photography Today which took place at Rutgers University.

2 The War on Terror, as it has come to be called, actually represents several different wars in several locations (Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, and Pakistan) with a variety of combatants. This paper is principally concerned with images emerging from Afghanistan, and in particular, when a surge of international troops began occupying the region in 2008.
3 I am following Mary Favret’s use of the term “wartime.” In War at a Distance (2009), Favret describes the ways in which modern forms of war are experienced by those who are not on the battlefield—how distant conflict can be felt in the civilian’s everyday life. She uses the term wartime to distinguish this experience of war from a distance, which, as she shows, was made ever more possible throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by the channels of the mass media.

4 Among the most recognizable “faces” of this wartime are surely the “seven bad apples”—the seven soldiers convicted of abuse in the Abu Ghraib prison scandal. Errol Morris and Philip Gourevitch have written extensively about the legibility and illegibility of these faces and gestures in articles appearing in the New Yorker and the New York Times (Gourevitch and Morris 2008; Morris 2008).

5 This is the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas’s oft-repeated, enigmatic statement, which is the subject of Hagi Kenaan’s recent study, The Ethics of Visuality: Levinas and the Contemporary Gaze (2013). I am indebted to Kenaan for much of my thinking here.

6 Shawn Michelle Smith (1999) has traced the ways photography was historically used in US culture to produce a model of subjectivity in which “exterior appearance was imagined to reflect interior essence” (4). Smith’s study problematizes Benjamin’s faith in physiognomy and, more specifically, shows how such catalogs of facial types were integral to the production of a racialized middle-class identity over the course of the nineteenth century. Needless to say, Smith’s questions remain pertinent in this catalog of wartime faces.

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References


