

## **Photographing the Sound and the Fury: War Photography and New Media**

**Ved Prakash**

“What the Photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: the Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially.” (Barthes 4)

“A war that is distinguished by the high level of technical precision, is bound to leave behind documents more numerous and varied than battles waged in earlier times, less present to consciousness.” (Junger 24)

At present, our society is visibly surrounded by the state of warfare. It seems one cannot escape the institution of war even when one is sitting in one's living room away from the war zones. The images from the war fronts which are published in newspapers, journals, and magazines and the ones which are shown on TV screens regularly, convey the trauma of war to the masses. The reason war has been one of those human activities that seem to produce innumerable images is because of the overt curiosity of the common man with the domain of violence. In the age of New Media where nations have come closer and a lot more information is always in circulation, it becomes all the more essential to consider what should be captured in a war through the camera lens and what should be disregarded. This is not a hidden fact that photographers at present do not mind jeopardizing their lives in order to click iconic images which may provide an explicit visual representation of war. At present, war photographers are pushing the line so that they can get as close to war as possible. However, at times they have to pay a serious cost for this act of courage. The list of war photographers who have died during the course of capturing conflicts is endless. There is a high possibility of being the victim while documenting the victims of war. Freelance photojournalist Ahmed Deeb has been covering the conflict in Syria. In the documentary titled *Son of War – Photojournalist Risks his Life to Capture Conflicts*, he recounts: “If anything happens, I am the witness, may be one day I will be the news itself. One time, I gave up and I said it's OK, it's the last minutes of my life.” Ahmed Deeb knows that the choice which he has made of course provides the world a window to peep into the pain and agony of people who continue to suffer as war has become a norm at present. However, the point which one needs to postulate is whether war photographers

ever decide to pause clicking? And on what parameters they decide what all needs to be captured? What is the whole politics of selecting and freezing a moment?

In this age of New Media, the emergence of war photography has dramatically altered the way the public perceives conflicts. New Media and technology has made the movement of war photography easier. In the present scenario, there is an intense consumption of war photographs amongst the mass. In fact, anything which has to do with war becomes extremely significant not only because war leads to destruction, bloodshed, and gory images but it also glorifies violence which leads to some kind of a voyeuristic pleasure. German-American political theorist Hannah Arendt in her book *On Violence* (1970) writes about how nations and civilisations have always thrived on violence. Some of the greatest empires were built on the institution of killing but what is really shocking is that there has been a normalisation of violence through TV, films, videos games, advertisements etc. One interacts with violence all the time and this perpetual interaction leads to the accommodation of violence. Arendt opines, “No one engaged in thought about history and politics can remain unaware of the enormous role violence has always played in human affairs, and it is at first glance rather surprising that violence has been singled out so seldom for special consideration” (8). This shows to what extent violence and its arbitrariness were taken for granted and therefore neglected; no one questions or examines what is obvious to all. Those who saw nothing but violence in human affairs convinced that they were “always haphazard, not serious, not precise” (8).

Hannah Arendt goes on to give an example of Carl Philipp Clausewitz, a German general and military theorist who believed that war cannot be looked at in isolation as it is not a segregated entity. At present, war as a social institution has become a transaction. Apart from all the destruction, the powerful nations attempt to accommodate war to contribute to their economy. The dominant power structures do not shy away from intimidating and victimising the subordinate under the guise of justice and equality. The pretence of justice is maintained till the desired objectives are not achieved by the dominant. Clausewitz in his most seminal work titled *On War* (1832), written after the Napoleonic wars, asserts that war cannot be quantified or reduced to maps, diagrams, geometry or graphs. In fact, war is a continuation of politics and it is an act of violence to compel ones opponent to accomplish ones will (27)<sup>1</sup>. Clausewitz uses the term ‘political commerce’ to hint upon how war is used as an investment to accomplish power over the powerless.

As far as photography in relation to war is concerned, one can infer that photography has always been perceived as a potential threat during the state of war because a photograph can act as a testimony. During the First World War, the practice of photography was forbidden in France and in fact, there was an official order from the state that anyone found with a camera in the public domain could be punished. Despite the orders, people still attempted to click covertly. With regard to the domain of photography there is no doubt that there has always been a disputation about how photography affects the social, cultural and political fabric of a society and how it creates new avenues of knowledge. There are beliefs that photography brings us closer to reality as it conveys a sense of time and place while some believe, it rather carries a fixed, rigid reality which is decided and propagated by the view of the photographer alone. The question of reality will be taken up in the latter part of the paper. The basic premise of this paper is to look into the phenomenon of war photography and to analyze how authentic and (un)biased is the domain of knowledge which is constructed by the photographs from the conflict zones?

With the invention of photography in the 1830s, the act of capturing the war to enhance public awareness was explored. The invention of photography changed the whole landscape of culture and communication in the West. The possibility of capturing real life events finally became a reality. Photography became immensely popular because the resemblance of a photograph with actuality was more intimate in comparison to a painting. With the arrival of photography, the dead could be remembered. Photography became a medium not only to document but create events as well. One of the debates which continue to be of great importance even today with regard to the sphere of photography is how much a photographer creates while capturing a moment?

During the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the photographers could not explore much because of technical insufficiency. In order to click a steady, non-hazy photograph the subject had to be still because a slight movement would ruin the image. Therefore, many pictures such as portrait images of the soldiers were often staged. During the American Civil War (1861-1865)<sup>2</sup>, photographers such as Alexander Gardner (1821-1882) and Mathew Brady (1822-1896) played a significant role in documenting the War. However, a few questions were raised over the authenticity of the process of documentation. It is believed that Gardner and Brady recreated scenes of battle to provide a distorted portrayal of war. The inaccurate depiction of war happened through many ways. For example soldiers and army personnel were often asked to pose in front of the camera to

produce the desired images which the photographers had in their minds. Moreover, there were moments when bodies of dead soldiers were rearranged to intensify the visual and emotional effects of the battle. Can we assume that during the Civil War the photographers while recording history ended up creating an alternative history? If so then one could argue that photographs which are considered to be the source of truth and reality may in fact represent a manipulated and fabricated narrative.



In this image, one can see that the soldiers are aware of the fact that they are being photographed. It is believed that war photographs are of two kinds: one, in which you look at the subject, and second, in which the subject looks at you. This picture works both ways as some soldiers are facing the lens while the others are consciously looking away from it.



The present photograph by Mathew Brady pays equal attention to soldiers as well as guns. The soldiers, who died in the war, have been arranged in one line to enhance the frame of the photograph. Moreover, it seems the guns have been placed around them to create a spectacle. The way this picture has been taken, shows that guns are not just a backdrop prop but their presence at the forefront of this image creates a sense of a battle field.

Susan Sontag, who is an American writer and a film maker, in her work *On Photography* writes that photographs are more than mere photographs. The prevalence of photographic culture has to have an impact on our sense of reality. The relation between photography and reality is thought of as a simple and mimetic one but it is not that simple. Photographs work as a site of a witness. Photographs establish the fact that they do not lie therefore they are a tool of power. Sontag states, “Photography has become almost as widely practiced an amusement as sex and dancing – which means that, like every mass art form, photography is not practiced by most people as art. It is mainly a social rite, a defence against anxiety, and a tool of power” (8).

If photography works as a tool of power as Sontag believes then it becomes all the more important for photographers like Brady and Gardner to capture what they see and not what they would want to see as photographs which are modified by the select view of the photographer which is a misuse of power that can lead to the construction of an alternate truth. However, with the change in technology, photographers could reach closer to the war zones and perhaps there was a less of a need to stage the photographs but one cannot be certain. One needs to understand how New Media disseminates war photography and how authentic and reliable is this dissemination? Furthermore, New Media has created newfangled sources of documenting the history and memory of war and one needs to be sure about the legitimacy of this history.

Colin Ford, the British photographic curator and historian of photography in his foreword to Jane Carmichael’s book *First World War Photographers* writes:

The photographers first went to wars with bulky wooden cameras and tripods, boxes of glass plates and bottles of dangerous chemicals; in the early 1850s such encumbrances were the essential tools of a medium barely 15 years old. Roger Fenton, recognized as a pioneer of war photography, carried all his apparatus in a converted wine merchant’s van which became unbearably hot and uncomfortable,

moved slowly and was a perfect target for enemy gunfire. His consciously artistic photographs show nothing of the real action of the campaign... By technique, circumstance and temperament, Fenton and his Victorian contemporaries took photographs that were pale shadows of the events they witnessed. Mathew Brady and others in the American Civil War perhaps came nearer to revealing some of the horror of war, but nevertheless the most famous of their dramatic photographs had to be posed. (v)

Ford clearly mentions that photographs were staged and hence the depiction of war by such photographs becomes problematic and debatable. Jane Carmichael similarly opines that:

Photographs convey a wealth of visual information in compendious format and tend to be accepted rather uncritically. However, war photographs in particular are ambivalent documents, which can range from the straightforward record of a scene to those which have been 'helped' towards an appropriate mood or a deliberately contrived misrepresentation. An extra dimension in terms of sensationalism or bias can be added when they are published. (1)

If an extra dimension of sensationalism can be added then the whole rationale behind capturing a photograph to convey a sagacity of significance gets lost as sensationalism is a manner of over-hyping the events as it chooses to report heavily on stories with shock values or uninvited attention. However, from the 1880s onwards cameras became progressively smaller and were able to take more instantaneous pictures, but during the First World War (1914-1918) these cameras were still not equipped to keep pace with the action and magnitude of the massive conflict. With the technical invention of the 35mm camera which was introduced in the late 1920s, action photography got a new dimension. During the First World War, there were three foremost categories of photographers; official, press and amateur. These three different categories brought different perspectives and politics to photography. Earlier official reporting was done by the forces themselves but with the emergence of popular media, military developed an organization of professionals. The organization included specifically appointed professional photographers to war correspondents, cinematographers and artists. The official professional photographer, who would be integrated into the service, would get a commissioned status and a special access to the conflict zones on a limited basis. However, there is a price which

the photographer would have to pay for these privileges and the price would be an undeviating attack on the art and ethics of photography as the photos would be subjected to both military and civilian censorship.

As far as ordinary press photographers are concerned, they were not as privileged as the official photographers. In fact they found themselves severely restricted as they would be excluded from the most important battle areas or they would be allowed to access the war spaces with a special authorization mostly when the battle will be over. The press photographers would be compelled to click photographs of the ground or trees from the battle zones to portray the impact of war. However, amateur photographs added another level of representation when it comes to war. As cameras became more accessible, servicemen started taking their personal cameras to war. Given the restriction of the official and the press photographers, the amateur had an interesting role to play. For instance, personal experiences of war would be recorded and on occasion the unprofessionally clicked photographs would provide a window to peep into the whole psychology of war unseen by many.

If we take the instance of American soldiers and their presence in Iraq then it becomes perspicuous why circulation of the pictures of war cannot be stopped. The first invasion of Iraq began in 2003 on 20<sup>th</sup> March by the United States as it was claimed that Iraq had possession of ‘weapons of mass destruction’. However, George J. Tenet, the former director of central intelligence of USA accused Bush administration for pushing the country to war in Iraq without ever conducting a serious investigation whether Iraq had fatal weapons which could pose a threat to USA or other countries? Nonetheless, the point is that many American soldiers carried along their digital cameras instead of pen and paper to communicate from the front, and this led to the virtually infinite supply of images.

Exploring further into the dominion of reality and history with relation to photography, one needs to understand that photographs often remain entangled in between what is known and what is not. A photograph can show certain aspects explicitly but at the same time it might contain a space which may not tell us what else is there in a particular picture? To delimitate further upon history and memory, Judith Butler in her article “Photography, War, Outrage” talks about the phenomenon of “Embedded Reporting”, which entails images and narratives of certain kinds of action and the gaze which remains restricted to the parameters of designated movements. The phenomenon of “Embedded Reporting” seemed to emerge with the invasion of Iraq. It is defined as a

situation in which journalists agree to report only from the perspectives established by the military and government authorities. They travel on selected trucks, look at certain things and relay home only images and narratives of a certain kind of an action. Thus, they archive a partial history and memory. “Embedded Reporting” can be compared with the official photographers of war as they too would be restricted with regard to their action and movement. For instance, the US government denounced American newspapers and journalists to show the coffins of dead American soldiers shrouded in flags during the Iraq war. The phenomenon of censoring war photographs is prevalent across nations. For instance, Fay Anderson, who is an Associate Professor of Journalism Studies at Monash University, in her article “We Censor War Photography in Australia—More’s the Pity” remarks:

What we don’t see is the reality of war. It has never been shown to us... because photographers have never been allowed to present a true account. The searing, brutal images of ‘our boys’ have rarely been published. Australian newspaper photographers have always been forbidden to show military failure or fragility. During the first and second world wars the authorities censored all photographs from the frontline, and since the 1960s, despite the myth of the ‘uncensored war’, photographers have rarely been afforded unlimited access to Australian soldiers. Although more than 100,000 Australians have lost their lives as a result of war service, photographs of or dead have never been published in newspapers. And images of the wounded are only shown when it accords with dignifying iconography. (The conversation.com)

This constant censorship and restriction from the higher governmental authorities clearly indicates the involvement of power and politics in war and how it is represented to common people as photography plays an imperative role in socio-political scenarios which are far from the scene of hostilities. To conclude, one could opine that photography can be a powerful tool to come close to the reality of battles and war zones. It is also a fact that many state machineries often censor war photographs as realities of war zones can be too intense. One can understand that any war cannot be documented in its completeness through cameras as war zones apart from being highly dangerous have their own spatial limitations. One thing which probably the photographers both independent and the ones who work for the state apparatuses must realize, is that photographs can be a strong medium to project war because of their visual aspect and one

must attempt not to distort the reality which gets represented through photographs. Nonetheless, one must realise that in today's world of new media, it has become extremely difficult to define authenticity. Cellphone cameras are ubiquitous, thousands of photographs are clicked every day and innumerable images are edited to seek the desired results out of photographs. Therefore, it becomes all the more important for the photographers of the war zones to resist the oppressive power structures and their policy of censorship so that their work is not perceived as a work of fiction.

### End Notes

- 1) Clausewitz highlights this point in his book I, Chapter I which is titled "On the Nature of War".
- 2) The American Civil War- Seven Southern slave states individually declared their secession from the United States and formed the Confederate States of America, known as the "Confederacy" or the "South". The war had its origin in the fractious issue of slavery, especially the extension of slavery into the western territories. After four years of bloody combat that left over 600,000 Union and Confederate soldiers dead, and destroyed much of the South's infrastructure, the Confederacy collapsed, slavery was abolished, and the difficult Reconstruction process of restoring national unity and guaranteeing civil rights to the freed slaves began.
- 3) The picture has been clicked by Mathew Brady. The source of this picture is *History.com*.
- 4) The picture is also clicked by Mathew Brady. The source of this picture is *Vintagecameraclub.com*.

### Works Cited and Consulted

- Anderson, Fay. "We Censor War Photography in Australia—More's the Pity". *Theconversation.com*.
- Arendt, Hannah. *On Violence*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1970.
- Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Vintage Books, 2000.
- Brothers, Caroline. *War and Photography: A Cultural History*. Routledge, 1977.
- Butler, Judith. "Photography, War, Outrage". *PMLA*, Vol.120, No.3, 2005. pp. 822-827.
- Carmichael, Jane. *First World War Photographers*. Psychology Press, 1989.
- Charles, Molesworth. "Photography and War: The Protocols". *Salmagundi*, No. 144/145, 2005. pp. 11-19.

Clausewitz, Carl Von. James John Graham and F. N. Maude. *On War*. Wilder publications, 2008.

Junger, Ernst and Anthony Nassar. “War and Photography”. Special Issue on Ernst Junger, *New German Critique*, No.59, 1993, pp. 24-26.

*Son of War – Photojournalist Risks His Life to Capture Conflicts*. Directed by Jihan Hafiz. AJ+. 2016.

Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. Penguin Classics, 1977.

— \* —