

Theatres of War

Mark Power

At first glance it is a simple picture. A number of paths, nestling between two modest hills, disappear into the far distance. The light is flat and uninteresting, the sky blank.

Yet there is something odd about it. The scale is disconcerting. The place looks ravaged, utterly bleak. Then, on closer inspection, rocks are revealed as canon balls; they are everywhere, strewn all over the landscape, tens, perhaps hundreds of them, disappearing towards the vanishing point.

This is, of course, one of the most celebrated of all photographs: *The Valley of the Shadow of Death*, by the eminent Victorian and first ‘official’ war photographer, Roger Fenton. Sent to the Crimea in 1854 by the British government, with the official blessing of Prince Albert (the first of a long line of the royal family to show a keen interest in photography) Fenton was instructed to bring back pictures which might reassure an anxious British public that the war against Russia was going according to plan. He did of him exactly what was asked, producing pictures which gave the impression that war was a static affair, fought by gentlemen who would relax at the end of a hard day with a glass of wine, a cigarette and a newspaper. Not a drop of blood - and certainly no death - anywhere in sight.

And yet *The Valley of the Shadow of Death* is surely one of the most powerful of all war photographs. It’s bleakness and emptiness conjures up the horrors of war as effectively as almost any other picture I can think of. It succeeds because of what is not there, rather than what is. In short, it leaves us to imagine what it must have been like to have been there.

Fenton traveled around the Crimea in a horse drawn mobile darkroom, since his

wet-collodian process required his plates to be coated with light-sensitive emulsion immediately before each exposure and to be developed straight afterwards. We should not forget that photographic emulsions in the 1850's were extremely slow - or insensitive - which meant that Fenton's exposures, even in the brightest sunlight, were never less than three seconds, and were more often nearer twenty. Therefore his pictures could never hope to capture 'action'; instead his figures had to be posed and his landscapes needed to be devoid of people.

He visited the dangerous ravine twice; on his second visit making two exposures. "The sight passed all imagination", he wrote. "Round shot and shell lay like a stream at the bottom of the hollow all the way down, you could not walk without treading upon them". 150 years later I like to think that *The Valley of the Shadow of Death* was Fenton's moment of rebellion, that he was well aware of the allegorical qualities of his enigmatically titled picture, and that he got it passed the censors with a knowing grin.

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It might be accurate to portray Fenton as the first 'aftermath' photographer, a term recently coined to describe the act of visiting a war zone after hostilities have ceased. Seen in this context Fenton's picture looks remarkably contemporary; indeed when, in 2002, the Irish photographer Paul Seawright traveled to Afghanistan as 'Official War Artist' for the Imperial War Museum in London (the first photographer to be given this role) his aptly titled piece, *Valley*, is clearly a homage to Fenton's photograph.

The term 'aftermath photographer' certainly does not apply to **Luc Delahaye**, whose work is made exactly where and when international news is created. I might instead draw comparisons with another 19th Century photographer, Matthew Brady, who presented himself (as Delahaye might) as a 'pictorial historian'. Unlike Fenton, Brady, the great recorder of the American Civil War, had no qualms in revealing the horror of battle, and corpses litter many of his

pictures (although whether or not Brady arranged the dead for aesthetic affect is open to dispute). But it is more ‘epic’ pictures which I like best, those made from a discreet distance, putting the war into context, using the qualities inherent within his enormous negatives to portray the futility of it all.

Delahaye’s acknowledged influences include historical paintings, a genre which, ironically, declined and was finally defeated by the invention of photography, and mostly particularly by Brady and his gang. “There is not really a recent comparison for what I do” states Delahaye, “because there was a break in the representation of history paintings at the end of the nineteenth century. If that tradition had lasted or evolved in a linear fashion it wouldn’t be necessary to stretch the frame to situate my work” (1).

It is hard to pin down a Delahaye picture these days. Gone is the photojournalist who won two Robert Capa gold medals, the man on contract with Newsweek, the Magnum member for ten years. The problem is that there is no longer a recognisable ‘style’ in his work, his first point of departure from the two other artists he is most consistently likened to, Andreas Gursky and Jeff Wall. True, most of Delahaye’s pictures are of a certain format - he often uses a large format panoramic camera - and all are presented at a monumental scale. However Delahaye’s distance from his subject constantly changes, as does the subject itself, which is frustratingly, but exquisitely, eclectic. But let’s face it: news, history in the making, is all-pervasive. It can happen anywhere, often unpredictably. Sometimes we are unable to grasp the significance of events until years - even decades – later. What may appear important today might, in the great scheme of things, cease to be so in the future, and vice versa. Delahaye’s practice, one assumes, leads down several blind alleys, yet he is blessed with phenomenal patience, often waiting several weeks for something to happen, with no guarantee that it ever will.

Then again, an event that receives Delahaye’s attention and which then reaches the gallery wall becomes hugely significant even if, on first glance, it might

appear to be insignificant, something on the periphery of the dramatic stuff we see on TV. It is as if the artist is not speculating on the importance of what his camera sees but is instead *telling us* that it is significant. His most iconic image, that of the dead soldier *Taliban* (2001) lying Pieta-like in a ditch, has become, I would suggest, the defining image of the Afghan war. Why is that? After all, this man is just one of thousands like him who perished; he is, on the face of it, nothing special. But this is a picture which is impossible to ignore; once seen it will never be forgotten. Paradoxically, the absolute democracy of the picture surface in all Delahaye's work refuses to tell us where to look but encourages us, instead, to wander. Even here, confronted with the dead soldier, surely such an overwhelmingly dominant subject, we still drift off into the luscious detail, the footprints surrounding the corpse (presumably those of his killers, his looters); the discarded, empty wallet; the thin brown socks. Our curiosity makes us feel uncomfortable, guilty for looking, feeling complicit in this awful scene. But, I speculate, this is exactly what Delahaye wants us to feel, and he achieves this without resorting to the simple tricks of sentimentality. Instead, Delahaye's work remains oddly dispassionate, emotionally distant, the work, in short, of a reporter, a collector of history.

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While the authorities do their best to try and control the making and dissemination of photographs in the theatre of war Delahaye doggedly resists, traveling, for instance, in Northern Afghanistan with a small group of Northern Alliance fighters to escape detection and censorship. On the other hand **Geert van Kesteren**, a Dutch photojournalist, chose to be embedded with a battalion of US troops for seven weeks of his seven month stay in Iraq following the official ending of the second Gulf war in April 2003.

There were, and continue to be, a lot of photographers in Iraq. Compare the deaths so far: by the end of January 2007 130 journalists and media support personnel have been killed there, and 43 have been kidnapped. Compare this to

World War I, when only two lost their lives while covering the fighting, or Vietnam, the first war to be fought on television, when 66 correspondents were killed during the 20 years of the conflict. These figures suggest that (a) journalists are in Iraq in greater numbers, (b) that the war there is somehow more ‘dangerous’, or certainly more unpredictable, or (c) journalists are taking greater risks for the sake of ever more dramatic footage.

Van Kesteren’s publication *Why Mister Why?* is widely considered to be Iraq’s equivalent to *Vietnam Inc*, Philip Jones Griffiths’ seminal book about the war in Vietnam, which was first published in 1971. Both books unequivocally defend oppressed, non-combatant civilians, and while the troops on the ground are the subject of considerable criticism for their often heavy-handed tactics (although a recurrent theme of van Kesteren’s work shows rookie soldiers appearing to have no idea what they are doing or why they are there) the longest fingers are pointed directly at the politicians in Washington. ‘Whoever pretends to bring democracy to a country must themselves act sincerely’ writes van Kesteren in his introduction. ‘(They must) uphold the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Geneva Conventions, and act with common decency and respect for the culture of that country. There are countless people in Iraq who told me the same thing: “If this is democracy then they can keep it”.

The so-called ‘battle for hearts and minds’ is treated with determined irony by van Kesteren, who was clearly appalled by many of the methods deployed by the battalion he was embedded with. What, he repeatedly asks, gives Americans the right to think they can impose their values on a culture so diametrically opposed to themselves in the name of ‘freedom’? Then, suddenly, we see a series of harrowing images of the exhumation of hundreds of bodies executed by the Saddam regime, a bitter reminder of a tragic, all too recent past, and of the complexity of the current situation.

While the resulting book is recognized as an important contribution to the genre

(it is included in Parr and Badgers *The Photobook: A History, Volume II*) it is Van Kesteren's innovative multi-media presentation which we are proud to be showing in Krakow, only the second time the complete version of the show has been seen anywhere. If the concept of the roving war photographer taking a moral stance within a political context might be familiar territory, the ambition of van Kesteren's exhibition most certainly is not. It uses the most up-to-date technology, including live feeds of news broadcasts from Baghdad, multi screen projections and a complex soundscape featuring interviews with Iraqi civilians and American soldiers. The result is a layered experience, somehow transporting the viewer a little closer to the place itself while at the same time stressing the intricacy of the situation. The overall impression is one of confusion; does anyone really know what the hell is going on out there?

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In November 1994 the British photographer **Lisa Barnard** traveled to San Francisco to meet the East Bay Chapter of the 'Blue Star Moms', a nationwide organization created in 2001 as a support group for mothers with sons or daughters serving in the US military. Members wear the defining five point star, an unofficial yet open declaration, while in their windows hang Blue star flags - originally designed in 1917 - a white background with a red border, containing a star for each progeny serving.

The Blue Star Moms 'Care Packages' initiative aims to send packages of 'useful consumables' out to American troops regardless of where they are stationed. Assorted items, donated by local folk, are packed into transparent bags - to prevent leakage - before being shipped out on military carriers. The packages, according to one mother, "remind them of home and help ease their stay out there".

Their website (2) lists a number of 'preferred items', including a number of edible

'treats' and, under the subtitle 'Fun Things' are requests for holiday decorations, DVDs, Nerf Footballs, basketballs, Boggle, Mississippi Marbles, squishy balls, Beanie Babies and Whoopee cushions. Barnard's photographs - *Care Packages* (1) - feature some of these things plus a multitude of others: hand warmers, sewing kits, Q-Tips, single use cameras and pipe cleaners for cleaning weapons. Toys, games and sweets are a poignant reminder of the youth of many of the recruits, while writing paper, pens and pencils are meant to encourage letters home. There are even bags with contents specially chosen for women: make up remover, deodorant, razors and panty-liners (which, strangely, find their way into the general packages as well, to be used for lining the insides of steel helmets).

While in California Barnard went to a supermarket with a Blue Star Mom, Anne Sandman, to buy items for another mother, whose 19-yr-old son had been, officially, 'killed in action'. It was the 7th time in a year that Sandman had made this expedition, each with vigilant consistency, since the contents of these packages - this time a large blue bag - never varied.

Barnard presents the contents in *Care Packages* (2) (although they might be more accurately described as 'Grief Packages'). Displayed actual size on a matt black background, at first glance the items look perfectly ordinary, the contents of any American shopping trolley. But here, as we know, everything has been carefully chosen to perform one specific function. There are a number of labour saving items, (plastic cups, paper plates, plastic cutlery, waste bags; all, presumably, for the wake), a selection of comfort food (cookies, popcorn), postage stamps, toys and treats for other, younger children, and, most poignant of all, a large pack of paper towels, at a 'slim price' of just 59c. It is a simple gesture from one mother to another - "a way of showing that we care and we understand their loss" – given in the knowledge that fate has no rules whatsoever.

The pictures are oddly reminiscent of Pascal Rostain's and Bruno Mouron's

photographs of the contents of celebrity trash bins – Arnold Schwarzenegger, Larry King, Jack Nicholson, Tom Cruise (with his 13 different items for face care) among the many ‘victims’. But few celebrity offspring would join the lowest rung of the US marines. The Blue Star Moms kids, on the other hand, are just ordinary, vulnerable teenagers, one day convinced by the rhetoric of a smooth-talking recruitment officer to defend their country against the threat of terrorism, with the added promise of fulfillment and glamour in often directionless lives.

Barnard attended a memorial service for the 19 year old, writing later of the ranks of television cameras competing for the tears while anti-war protestors yelled torrents of abuse. One wonders how many of the parents present, in their heart-of-hearts, actually supported the war in Iraq? If the adage is true that it is worse for those left behind then Barnard’s work offers some evidence of this. Helpless to do anything but write letters of unconditional parental love or send a few humble offerings wrapped up like forensic evidence, their efforts nevertheless mask the unease of knowing so little. But, I’m sure, it fails to relieve the long dark nights, praying the terrible phone call never comes.

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The security industry is estimated to be worth over 100 billion dollars a year. It is a business that thrives on fear; the more frightened we are the greater is our need to be protected, until we begin to fear protection itself. Security is sold to us on the understanding that we need it now more than ever before, but gradually the boundary between ‘good’ and ‘evil’ seems to have blurred to a point where the implication is that we can trust almost nobody, and we are ourselves suspicious. And, now that fear equals profit, here we are slap in the middle of the Orwellian nightmare.

Christopher Stewart has been photographing international systems of security and surveillance for the past ten years. It all began innocuously enough, when he

was given access to “low-level security personnel guarding industrial estates and patrolling city metros” (3). Through a now extensive network of contacts within the business the ambition of Stewart’s project has burgeoned to ever more mysterious, secretive organizations (often, curiously, carrying out their chilling business in public places - airports, hotels, roads and passageways - “while the public (go) about their business none the wiser”). Hearing this, I am reminded of a new – and increasingly popular - computer game we can all access, which uses real people in a real environment controlled by players in a virtual world.

It took months, sometimes years, for Stewart to get access to some of the places he has photographed. In some cases, with negotiations apparently successfully completed, he would be denied at the last moment; contacts would fail to show up, or he would lose the security personnel he was trying to shadow. *Kill House* adds a further, successful chapter to his work, but access to it was something he wasn’t expecting. “It is the surprises encountered out in the world”, he says, “and the ability to use photography to represent them, that ensures the enduring relevance of documentary even when our relationship to this ‘genre’ has become, shall we say, more considered” (4).

But what exactly is *Kill House*? Named by the people who use it, it is designed to train private military personnel to flush out domestic homes in a war zone, in particular in Iraq (where a recent estimate suggests some 25,000 of these people are operating) and Afghanistan. It is a place to learn to attack an enemy with ‘extreme prejudice’; a place designed, as Stewart suggests, “to follow fear rather than function”.

The eight images which constitute this series were made in under an hour, during his second visit. The first photographs he made there were more literal, more descriptive of the purpose of the place; harsh, flash-lit pictures of figures in the midst of combat: “They show you what you might expect a war zone to look like - lots of smoke and violence” (5). Stewart rejected them because they gave the

viewer too much information and left little to the imagination. Indeed, it is surely more poignant to leave us to speculate on what *might* happen here in this dystopian arena. In so doing, Stewart's photographs 'resonate with so much we know but maybe wish we didn't' (6) Close scrutiny of the virtually black photographs reveals - emerging out of the gloom - deep gouges in the hard concrete walls, dark stains on the floor, locked doors, ochre rust and discarded bits of seemingly useless furniture which might, if we didn't know better, be nothing more than props in a simple stage set.

Kill House is located somewhere on the vast, un-peopled plains of Arkansas, deep in the American mid-West. This much we know, but there remains much we don't. It is a building of indeterminate size, although Stewart's photographs do take us on a form of 'journey' through the space. Similarly, we don't know what it looks like on the outside. Presumably it is an innocuous building much like any other, but is it safe in a military camp or is it just out there somewhere, locked but otherwise unprotected, because it has nothing to hide? It is after all only a space, "a structure", Stewart tells us, "that is potentially nowhere and everywhere at once" (7).

I have often wondered *why* Stewart is allowed to see and photograph such things. Are the men and the manoeuvres he shadows really as real as he is led to believe? (This is something he will never know). Whether or not they are, one can only assume 'they' want people to know about this. If just a little is allowed to seep out (it is made absolutely clear to Stewart exactly what he can and cannot photograph) then it fuels the insecurity we already feel. It reminds us there is a real danger out there. It also warns us – and perhaps even this is part of their agenda? – that there are people out there who, in the name of protection, are truly terrifying and whom we mess with at our peril.

Last week, on the evening news, there was a story about the winner of the Arab version of American Pop Idol. Thousands of people were out on the streets celebrating the victory of an Iraqi woman, Shada Hassoun, seen on a big screen above the joyous crowd, wrapped in the red, white and black Iraqi flag. She had won with a traditional song about the beauty of Baghdad, written before the war. It was a welcome respite, the report continued, for the people of this war-torn country where there had been over five hundred deaths this week alone.

The item was buried somewhere in the middle of the bulletin. This is the norm these days, for there are deaths in Iraq everyday, and Western interest for the story and empathy for the casualties has been replaced by fatigue. Sometimes now there is no report at all.

Growing up in the middle of England in the 1970's and early 1980's the so-called 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland were dealt with in much the same way. A civil war lasting nearly thirty years - involving Republican and Loyalist paramilitary organisations, the Royal Ulster Constabulary, the British Army and others - couldn't hope to sustain the interest of the public in the rest of the United Kingdom. Day after day sectarian killings were reported, in parks and pubs, and in what looked to me, and everyone else that watched from the other side of the Irish Sea, perfectly ordinary homes. That's what I remember most - that the houses didn't look much different from the one I lived in, and the landscape seemed much the same as well. It was the ordinariness of it all that was perhaps the most striking thing about it; murders were simply an everyday occurrence and, while everyone in Northern Ireland 'knew somebody who...' most people simply got on with their lives. There are many memorable and poignant photographs of the conflict. In one (by Philip Jones Griffiths) we see a British soldier hiding in a bush, gun poised by his shoulder, while a woman behind him mows her garden dressed in a nylon housecoat, apparently oblivious to his presence.

In South Armagh, a small border region between the north and south of Ireland, so many British soldiers were killed by the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) that it came to be described as ‘bandit country’ by one minister. In response, the army built observation posts on twelve hilltop sites, where they could carry out surveillance of the area in reasonable safety. In a matter of a few months in the mid-80’s South Armagh had become one of the most heavily militarized regions in Western Europe. While the death toll fell after their construction the tension between the Army and the local, mainly Republican population was amplified, for while the British troops defined the towers as purely defensive positions, those who lived in their shadow saw only offense and intrusion. Sophisticated technology within the towers, and in bunkers beneath, enabled the troops to eavesdrop on any suspects to the point where, it was rumoured, they could see and hear what was being eaten and said over the breakfast table of a far distant house.

The Belfast-born photographer and film maker **Donovan Wylie** photographed these watchtowers and observation posts – in retrospect some of the most pregnant symbols of the Troubles - before they were finally dismantled and removed (in return for the decommissioning of IRA weapons). Wylie’s resulting series, *Towers* (seen here for the first time) is the natural successor to *The Maze* - published in 2004 - his previous project about the infamous prison (also in Belfast) built to house both Republican and Loyalist prisoners, which Wylie systematically photographed following its closure the year before.

Wylie was flown around South Armagh in a military helicopter, enabling him to view many of the towers from an even more elevated position than the fifteen metres they often stood. In so doing, we get both a sense of how far the troops stationed there could see and, perhaps more importantly, we see the towers in context. The diptychs and triptychs are most successful at doing this since in these images the towers are often so understated they are difficult to find. All the photographs, however, suggest the brooding presence of the towers, looming

ominously over the ruggedly picturesque landscape. Just how many supplies, how many shipments of weapons found a way through this terrain, and how many paramilitaries escaped in the opposite direction? For here, in this rural idyll, the Troubles would have escalated into a vicious war. There would have been no witnesses save for the hills themselves. Like Christopher Stewart's *Kill House* we can only imagine.

In another section an urban observation post is photographed from several viewpoints (Wylie seeming to enjoy the surveillance of the surveillance tower itself), sitting slap in the midst of a small town. These pictures remind me of an occasion last year, when I drank tea with a Palestinian architect in his Bethlehem home, the curtains drawn to block out an Israeli observation tower immediately outside his window. Bullets had ripped chunks out of the wall above his bed. The soldiers, he claimed, enjoyed a game of taking potshots, seeing how near they could get without actually hitting him. It was the closest I have ever come to a war zone myself. It appalled me that one of the most basic of human needs, let alone human rights – his very privacy - was being denied to this gentle man.

On 13th February 2007 the last observation post was ceremonially removed from South Armagh, from above the army-backed Crossmaglen police station. Now all the towers are gone (so thank goodness for Wylie's wonderful pictures) but the border between north and south remains. British military presence in the province is gradually being reduced; in 1972, at the height of the Troubles, some 27,000 troops were stationed there while today that number has fallen to just 7,700. By the end of July there will be less than 5,000. So, it would seem, wars *do* end, a peaceful solution *can* be found. So it would seem.

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Photography of or about war has a history virtually as long as photography itself. Most photographers with a social conscience start out thinking they can use their work to change the world. But of course photography cannot change anything,

not *really*. For war goes back much further than the camera, to the beginning of civilisation; violence has rarely, if ever, been used as the last option. Sadly, it's what the world does, or at least what those in power – often those we elect - do on our behalf.

How *can* photography, with all it's limitations, in our already overburdened, compassion-fatigued world, hope to make a difference? Some recent work by Gilles Peress, which mixes images of the Iraqi war with stills downloaded from war games (the two are frighteningly reminiscent of each other) asks what we can possibly say or do to warn a new generation who might think nothing of slaughtering a few virtual enemies before breakfast?

So why does anyone bother? Why is it that the five artists in this show continue to make work – innovative and original work at that - about war? It's because all any of us can do is try; we try do our bit because we need to do something. The artists here all believe that it is important to keep such issues alive in the public consciousness, because they are driven by the belief that what they want to show us, what they have to say, is important. None of the artists are shouting loudly; instead they are expecting us, the viewers, to engage with their work, to take some time to think and - to quote Christopher Stewart - "to contemplate one possible future". Beyond that, they are collecting evidence for history, and to send out a warning, and we should be grateful for that.

Mark Power. April 2007

1. Luc Delahaye. *Interview with Philippe Dagen*. 2004

2. www.bluestarmoms.com

3. Christopher Stewart. *Notes on Observations. Interview with the artist*. Open Eye Gallery, Liverpool. March 2006

4. Christopher Stewart. *Notes on Observations. Interview with the artist*. Open Eye Gallery, Liverpool. March 2006

5. Christopher Stewart. *Interview with Metro, Liverpool*. 2006

6. John Donaldson. '*Fear and Profit*'. Source no.46. Spring 2006

7. Christopher Stewart. *Notes on Observations. Interview with the artist.* Open Eye Gallery, Liverpool. March 2006