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# Photojournalism: Values and Constraints, Aestheticism, and Aftermath Photography

Ioannis Kontos <sup>1</sup> and Ioannis Galanopoulos-Papavasileiou <sup>2,\*</sup>

## ABSTRACT

This article delves into the essence of photojournalism, focusing on values and constraints and scrutinizing specific works by Yannis Kontos through the prisms of aestheticism and aftermath photography. Drawing on photojournalist methods, personal experiences, and literature, the authors articulate the nuanced nature of photojournalism at the convergence of aesthetics and aftermath. The core value of photojournalism, resembling forensic documentation, is explored, emphasizing the gathering of evidentiary material in adherence to practical mandates of objectivity, detachment, and neutrality. The discussion extends to practical dimensions, addressing challenges in environments such as war zones concerning time, logistics, technology, and ethics.

Contemplating the potential artistic dimensions of photojournalism, the article explores the interplay between aesthetic concerns and the preservation of journalistic and ethical integrity. The author's self-identification as a documentary photographer with a penchant for the aftermath movement underscores a nuanced approach. While acknowledging artistic exhibitions, the ultimate ambition is for contributions to be a lasting reference, inspiring future generations. In a critical engagement with the broader discourse on photojournalism, the paper situates the practice within both documentary and art photography. It offers a succinct exploration of the inherent values and constraints of photojournalism in diverse contexts, revealing its dynamics at the crossroads of aesthetics and documenting aftermaths.

**Keywords:** Aestheticism, aftermath photography, journalistic and ethical integrity, photojournalism.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. The Values and Redefinition of Photojournalism

In this section, we define photojournalism through comparative literature and practice and align it with the ways the photographer in the subject has experienced and understood it through his work as a war photographer. Then, we inquire about the potential connections of photojournalism to the aesthetic character of aftermath photography of war zones in Iraq and Afghanistan between 2001–2003 when the photographer was active in the region.

Kontos's practice illustrates the belief that it might be possible to end wars by using photography as a human act—human in the sense that the photographer takes numerous risks while simultaneously sharing the life and suffering of those s/he photographs. Plummer (1983) outlines the four criteria of the humanistic method:

1. It pays *tribute to human subjectivity and creativity, showing how individuals respond to social constraints.*
2. It deals with *concrete human experiences* through their social organization.
3. It shows an *intimate familiarity* with such experiences.
4. It is self-aware of *the ultimate moral and political role in moving towards a social structure in which there is less exploitation, oppression, and injustice.*



All four criteria define and largely determine the documentary method, still placing it under humanism and social responsibility (Petsini, 2007, p. 8).

But why photograph war? Is it the addictive nature of violence and even some voyeurism inherent in the business of photojournalism, the feeling that whatever practitioners bring home is evidence of something of tremendous significance? Or is it the fact that the history concerned will be written by your images, which is probably what propels them into such dangerous situations? We believe war photojournalists must fight emotional obstacles such as guilt, fear (even when an ally), and shame when taking a specific shot. Why do I have to photograph this? A photojournalist constantly asks. Should I stay, or should I leave the scene? As James Nachtwey comments, “*Every minute I was there, I wanted to flee. I did not want to see this. Would I cut and run, or would I deal with the responsibility of being there with a camera?*” (Frei, 2001, 1:07:11).

Yannis Kontos’s work conveys an understanding of war photography as a method of effectively divulging human manifestations and pathogenic events worldwide. That idealistic perspective assures him that he is not merely documenting history but also helping to change it. He perceives documented misery as a doctor views disease with the aim of curing it. Making a living by selling other people’s suffering is a nightmare that haunts him every single day. There is a psychological cost, sometimes imperative.

There is risk in such an attitude; young photojournalists may become addicted to war, especially as they desperately seek to acquire the prestigious label of war correspondent, which is a deadly ambition. By keeping a distance according to Kontos’s methods and, therefore, being disengaged, one is less addicted to suffering. However, it is paradoxical that no matter how many images of horror photojournalists show or how spectators seem to deal with them, instead of inciting them to rise and protest, there are proven examples where the images are simply ignored. It is because Kontos needed to understand war and make events known worldwide and because he deems that by documenting misery, he would become its cure, he became a photojournalist in the first place.

In the past, photojournalism used to be a profession of the few; today, new technologies have dramatically increased the number of people who deal with a certain kind of photojournalism. Despite this, there are still few professionals since it seems that it is not the risks that this occupation entails but rather the constraints it must function within that lead young photographers to seek different kinds of careers. Photojournalism is a particular form of journalism characteristically identified by its objective, detached, and neutral nature, which creates pictures to narrate a news story. Photojournalism’s traditional practice requires that pictures be taken in real-life situations using a straight, honest, or unmanipulated approach. As David Hurn suggests, “*The word ‘photojournalism’ implies that the subject of the picture is a topical news event, accompanied by words, published in the mass media, usually with the intent to right a social wrong*” (Hurn & Jay, 2001, p. 13). Donald Morrison provides another, more practical and functioning, definition of the term, “*Photojournalism is an untidy collision of art, reportage, and commercial publishing*” (Morrison, 1990, p. 6). Most of Kontos’s editorial work is reproduced in magazines and reaches a global audience. Therefore, his pictures seem to function like the visual equivalent of words on a page.

An editorial showcase, however, is just one small area where a photograph is expected to circulate as a response to real events. It is frequently argued that the photojournalist is associated with a “*foot-in-the-door, camera-in-the-face, aggression*” (Morrison, 1990, p. 6). In this view, we believe the profession’s core value is about collecting evidence, much like a forensic photographer would do. Then, the work becomes more factual and less about “good photography.” As Magnum photographer Gilles Peress states about his work, “*I’m gathering evidence for history so that we remember*” (Peress, 1997, October 6, para. 1).

All the above definitions are valid. Indeed, photojournalism is a timely and relatively objective kind of photography, often dedicated to narrating a story in response to real events. Indeed, the basic mission of a photojournalist is to take pictures to accompany a news story; its pictures attempt to capture the viewer’s attention and emotion to entice him/her to continue listening to or reading about a specific event.

### 1.2. *An Art Form?*

Photojournalism is primarily a practical form of photography, especially given the importance of maintaining the integrity of the scene. However, it may also be considered as an art form in its own right. Changes in political orthodoxy and media ownership have had a highly detrimental effect on photojournalism, to the extent that some photographers and critics have predicted its demise (Squiers, 1996, p. 54). Their concern is not only with simple exclusion but with newspapers and magazines’ control in editing, selecting, and presenting images to stress the spectacular at the expense of the critical (Ritchin, 1990, p. 110). Although it has been regularly used for conservative ends, photojournalism is

rooted in radical political and cultural movements and was always, therefore, a suspect practice.<sup>1</sup> Any suspicions that the elite might have harbored about photojournalism were confirmed in its important role in turning US public opinion against the Vietnam War. While this could only occur given the collusion of certain elements in the mass media, it set a dangerous precedent. In 1992, the Vietnam war photographer Don McCullin complained that it was no longer possible to have serious work published (and indeed, his international reputation did not prevent him from being made redundant from the *Sunday Times* after Rupert Murdoch took over since the new regime demanded: “no more starving Third World babies; more successful businessmen around their weekend barbecues”) (McCullin & Chester, 1992, p. 268).

Essentially, the ethical approaches to objectivity for photojournalists are the ones applied by other journalists. At the same time, selecting what to shoot, deciding how to frame, and how to edit a subject are constant considerations of the photojournalist; indeed, this is how and when they start becoming the narrator of a story. Moreover, a key aspect of photojournalism is to present accurate pictures that do not compromise the integrity of the actual situation. Thus, altering pictures with computer software is never a choice among serious photojournalists and news organizations. This code of ethics is one of the central features of photojournalism that distinguishes it from other areas of photography (NPPA, n.d.).

Digital photography has offered considerable new opportunities and instruments to the photographer for the manipulation, reproduction, and transmission of images. This has inevitably complicated a great deal of the ethical issues involved. At the same time, this has given a chance for the emergence of more “artistic” photojournalist work since now, besides the capture of reality as such. A narrator-photojournalist is also seriously concerned about the purely aesthetic dimension of his/her work. This has marked a fascinating shift in the profession.

Starting in the 1980s, more and more art galleries have displayed photojournalism, thus lending it more esteem as an art form. Periodically, a photographer or a curator chooses to isolate single pictures from their original context and display them in a gallery or a museum as images of lasting emotional and aesthetic power.

There are many constraints that a photojournalist must abide by. First of all, time constraints, since everything should take place fast, both the events and their capture; then there are the technical/“logistics” constraints: journeys, geography, weight limitations, etc., restrict the options of a photojournalist; thirdly, there are always the editor’s constraints, either ethical or aesthetic ones (for example, there are cases where manipulation of photographs is imposed by editor’s orders or, even worse, is implemented by digital after-treatment with or without the participation of the photographer); also there are commercial constraints, since, especially in printed media, war photographs have sometimes to compete with page long advertising; we cannot neglect the contextual constraints, with restrictions imposed by totalitarian regimes being the most difficult one to overcome; last but not least there are personal constraints, in terms of, for example, the very act of depicting certain scenes.

Thus, many times with top-level photojournalists similar to Kontos, there is a sense of relief when, after a hard-working day, they submit their pictures to their agency, knowing that they are no longer responsible for their fate, as the mission has just been completed. One might argue that better photojournalists combine the creativity and technical skills of the artist and the artisan, all the while working in an alienated situation comparable to that of the industrial worker. As David Levi Strauss wrote about the work of Richard Cross and John Hoagland, distinguished US photojournalists, who were killed in El Salvador, “*They did not own the pictures they made any more than a worker in a munitions factory owns the weapons he makes while employed*” (Strauss, 2005, p. 44).

### 1.3. *Aftermath Art Photography*

Certain war photographers, however, have a totally different attitude. They choose to work freely, without the constraints that discipline Kontos’s work. They select aesthetic criteria over the (ethically responsible, in my opinion) rule of approaching real events in a more neutral and objective yet humane way.

As Duganne (2007) notes in her essay *Photography After the Fact*, some contemporary photographers have gone beyond their reliance on the lightweight, 35 mm or digital handheld camera with its ostensible ability to freeze events quickly. Instead, they have turned to medium- or large-format cameras, the larger frames and sizes of which require a slower process and produce more detailed images of what comes “after.” In his *Desert Stories or Faith in Facts*, Ian Walker used the term “post-reportage” to define this shift in photography: “*I use that term ‘post-reportage’ to suggest not what photography cannot do, but what it can: document what comes after, what has been left when the war is over*” (Walker, 1995, p. 240). David Company reiterated this observation: “*Whatever its indexical*

<sup>1</sup>The founders of Magnum, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Robert Capa and David Seymour (‘Chim’) all worked on *Ce Soir*, the communist daily edited by Aragon.

primary, photography is now a secondary medium of evidence... the eclipse of the reality reportage of "events" and the emergence of photography of the trace or 'aftermath'" (Campany, 2003, p. 27).

It is easy to understand that more "artistic" photographic work does not need to comply with any of the constraints described in the paragraphs above: time is not an issue—or it can be prolonged in the dark room; technology can offer its full spectrum of possibilities for the image creator; editor-free portfolios have to obey only the photographer's points of view; media-imposed commercial constraints do not exist; context is not an issue, especially in the so-called aftermath photography; only personal constraints still persist, and even more intensely sometimes in artistic photography, since the act of image manipulation is always filtered through ethical and political criteria, more than the "capture of the moment" in "classic" war photography.

Consequentially, one might say that the lifting of such constraints is the emancipation of a photojournalist, the way to his/her "elevation" to a more sublime realm of the depiction of narration. In fact, this is what the aesthetic approach does: it creates a creator, an artist out of a professional photojournalist, by giving him/her the opportunity to gain control over his/her work. These are the constraints, for example, that Paul Seawright and Simon Norfolk are not obliged to obey.

Representation of war by contemporary art photographers was the subject of *The Sublime Image of Destruction*, a Brighton Photo Biennial 2008 exhibition in De La Warr Pavilion at Bexhill<sup>2</sup>. War photography marked all exhibitions in the rest of the Biennial, with wide-ranging content: old and new pictures, museum art and photojournalism, amateur and professional photographs presented side by side (Campbell, 2009).

The mere fact that photojournalists have entered the museums with these "meta-images" of theirs may imply that these works have ceased being works of journalism, but they have now been made works of art. Isn't art shown in museums, after all? Therefore, is there a deep modification taking place here in these kinds of images? Has the focus shifted from "depiction" towards "representation"? Are current photo galleries the cradles of a new art form? In such a case, is it right to judge these images according to the terms and criteria of vintage photojournalism, as we used to know? What are the borders between real photojournalism and the aftermath type?

Indeed, it may be easy to deduce, given all the circumstances laid out here, why such kind of photojournalism (the "aftermath" type-without, though, criticizing its artistic value, if any) is generally encountered with suspicion worldwide. Skepticism about the "truth" of such "reality tokens" is because it is no longer a secret that both the news organizations and the states and militaries are handling the coverage of international conflicts the way they need. People see pictures that are highly manufactured in many ways:

*"The ease and speed with which digital photography can be altered (along with a few well-publicised examples of photojournalists doing just that), and awareness of the extent to which meaning can be manipulated by selective framing, produces in many viewers deep distrust."* (Stallabrass, 2008a, p. 9).

Stallabrass (2008c), the curator of the Brighton Photo Biennial, contends that photojournalism can be matched against museum photography, amateur photography against professionals, and artists' use of photography in installation against the place of news photographs in blogs. Since photojournalism remains bound to newspaper or magazine pages, its photographers necessarily and automatically "capture" the real without any self-reflexivity or critical detachment. Artists, on the other hand, due to the self-sufficiency and distance of their images from the real, can think about the nature of representation and its depiction of reality in a more oblique and, hence, contemplative manner.

According to Stallabrass (2008b), the lines between the genres of photojournalism and artistic photography are somehow blurry:

*"The clearest examples of museum photography we're showing is work by Simon Norfolk, Paul Seawright, and Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, all of which is included in an exhibition looking in part at the genre of aftermath photography made with [medium or] large format cameras."* (Stallabrass, 2008b, p. 121).

In fact, the success of this genre of museum photography over the last 10-15 years is striking. In particular, the work of Paul Seawright *Mounds, 2002, Hidden* and Simon Norfolk *Baghdad, 19-27 April 2003* is not war photography as we know it. Their work is highly aestheticised; they prefer to depict the concept of abstraction over the irrationality of war and the surrealism of depopulated landscapes over the dignified gunshot faces of the dead. As Helen James observes: *"In many ways, the images by these photographers are closer to the medium of landscape photography than they are to the documentation of war"* (James, 2008, p. 12).

These images, from the lyrical and painterly images of Norfolk (2002, 2003) to the quieter and bleaker photographs of mine fields and ruins in Afghanistan by Seawright *et al.* (2003), stand in contrast to photojournalism, through a practice that claims to be more resolved and intellectual than

<sup>2</sup>The Sublime Image of Destruction exhibition in Bexhill was part of the Brighton Photo Biennial 2008, Memory of Fire: The War of Images and Images of War, Oct-Nov 2008.



the news-driven work of photojournalists. They also examine representation itself, as in [Chanarin and Broomberg \(2007\)](#)'s pictures of the Israeli training grounds of urban destruction and the imagined national landscape of surveillance, order, and control.

As with other museum photography, images in this genre relate to the tradition of painting by becoming registers of the destruction of war. At the same time, the use of large cameras encourages disengagement, stateliness, and distance, literal and sometimes emotional, from the subject.

Defining photojournalism as art does raise some problems for the standing ethics of photojournalism. While photojournalism denies image manipulation, does this restriction apply in its artistic form? If photojournalistic images are manipulated in the name of art, will people be equally willing to trust the images they see in newspapers and magazines? ([James, 2008](#)).

Today, war photography in the museum has turned into a medium of the aftermath. This is because the technological nature of today's warfare has resulted in a war that is nearly impossible to document as it happens. Surveying sites ruined by war and catastrophe—Bosnia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Kuwait, Beirut, Baghdad, Lebanon or Palestine—photographers such as Simon Norfolk and Paul Seawright have developed this strange new genre: employing saturated or subdued color, often on a monumental scale and with thrilling precision, they capture surfaces of the destroyed city of Baghdad, the snow-covered sites of Serbian mass graves, the barren post-war wastelands of Beirut, the Lebanese refugee camps and Israel's everyday militaristic cult of the dead. The surreal landscapes and alien environments charted by these photographers are as abstract, inhuman, and incomprehensible as the wars that caused them.

Radicalism in the aesthetic projects of these aftermath photographers lies in their taking beautiful photographs of gruesome subjects needing to be read against themselves. We argue that photographers like Simon Norfolk and Paul Seawright rely upon a process that sublimates the seduction of beauty into the horror of violence. Their work exploits this violent dialectic at the moment of realization. Thus, the aesthetics of sublimity serve not to transcend violence but to collapse into it, prompting a strange revelation or reflection upon the real that would otherwise be buried. Their carefully composed nature, the often-lengthy exposure time, and the beautifully printed form contrast starkly and offer an ideological alternative to the cheap current of 24-hour live coverage of the world's news agencies and the form of spectatorship this promotes ([Debrix, 2006](#)). In moving against the shocking televised images that are assumed to have lost their power, these careful, slow photographs force a deeper kind of reflection on important subjects too often lost in the media's glare. Equally, heightening the aesthetic and artistic status of the photograph enables withdrawal from the medium's purely documentary function and unburdens the image from photojournalism's truth claims. It releases itself from the exploitative or instrumental context that sees photojournalism manipulated by the largely conservative and nationalistically biased media organizations that determine its context and reception.

Such romanticist aesthetics have been comprehensively criticized and today seem obsolete, like “*an edifice which stands still, but on rotten foundations, propped up by vested interests*” ([Dollimore, 2003](#), p. 40). In aligning itself with the elitist aesthetics of the Enlightenment, does this photography not risk creating a meta-level of artificiality? Does it not, in fact, empty warfare of its moral content, picturing it instead in terms of a ‘*dreamlike landscape, like a furnace*,’ as Ernst Jünger called the aerial images of World War I? ([Hüppauf, 1993](#), p. 59). Do representations of the military sublime risk articulating a moral realism that could turn into ‘an iconographic apologia of a philosophy of harmony in the face of total destruction?’ ([Hüppauf, 1993](#), p. 55). Doesn't the dividing line between the beautification of war and photographic realism attempt to visualize the destructive might of contemporary warfare as involuntarily consumed by the coherence and consistency of the surface blur? ([Hüppauf, 1993](#), p. 55). In focusing on landscapes of the aftermath of war, Simon Norfolk and Paul Seawright are perhaps in danger of displacing violence from the political (carried out by subjects and inflicted upon subjects) to the natural. In this context, photography cannot but objectify and universalize the sublime experience, forcing the beholder of the sublime moment into a position of moral and subjective superiority. What may be clear is that such photography is embedded in the subjective and political. The question remains: does war photography that seeks to represent the inhuman, abstract world of this contemporary military sublime offer any resistance to it?

Kontos's work differs significantly from the work of the artists-photographers Simon Norfolk and Paul Seawright. Remaining faithful to the humanist tradition and the concept of social responsibility ([Petsini, 2007](#)), he is gradually distancing himself from his subject without becoming disengaged, giving priority to content over aesthetics. In that sense, he is using the explicit methods of the photojournalist to produce his images. He no longer covers the news; He works independently and without a journalist present, and he is not bound to the depiction of an unemotional recording of any extremities.

His work is closer to Simon Norfolk than to Paul Seawright since he conveys the “immediate” nature of his subject matter, and at the same time, he captures the event via his temporal “identification” with it. Kontos is, too, an eyewitness, considering that it is better to physically be where an event takes place—though, at a certain distance, which he believes is the optimal one: namely, close enough to feel what

happens and far enough to remain neutral. In fact, according to Kontos, if the photographer attempts to draw too close to what happens in the “shooting” field, then his/her presence alone unavoidably becomes “part” of the event, thus altering, to some extent, the events themselves. On the other hand, staying too far away, as Paul Seawright seems to do, might also result in a rather disengaged “sight,” which, again, “misses” the facts of life. In addition, Kontos seems to be interested in the permanent nature of the picture, resisting the news coverage and scheduled events.

Aftermath photography is, by default, less dramatic. Kontos is working between the two extremes. He creates images that primarily address the media and, secondly, address the gallery system and the book market. It is a fact that his images are far better received when they are promoted in printed media than in an exhibition (see Fig. 1). But is this not the main purpose of photojournalism, which is to reach as large an audience as possible?

Moving into galleries and book publishing has been one of the few ways for photographers to step around the restrictions imposed by the mass media. Apart from Sebastião Salgado, many others have tried to do work outside the daily pressures of conventional news coverage.<sup>3</sup> While his *Serra Pelada* pictures (1986) certainly create an immediate impact, the work of Philip Jones Griffiths, Susan Meiselas, and Gilles Peress tends to be reflective, dealing with long-term issues and dwelling on the visible aspect of structural problems. They often work with sequences of pictures rather than going for a single shocking or striking example (Stallabrass, 1997).

However, this kind of photography operates totally differently from the hard-hitting documentary shots of photojournalists that focus on human suffering. In an age where we have become numb to the graphic images we see on a daily basis, these beautiful images of terrible subjects that avoid gruesome elements-mutilated bodies and terrified civilians-become more powerful because imagination is left to do the work. Contemplation of beauty allows us to absorb the horrific reality of the situation.<sup>4</sup>

“Images have been reproached for being a way of watching suffering at a distance, as if there were some other means of watching. But watching up close—without the mediation of an image—is still just watching” (Sontag, 2004, p. 105).

It goes without saying that problems arise when evidence and art mix. Which has more *social value*, aftermath photography or photojournalism?

Large prints in *The Sublime Image of Destruction* by Norfolk, Paul Seawright, Adam Broomberg, and Oliver Chanarin achieve resolution of detail beyond that which can be absorbed on a screen or printed page, justifying their size. Limitations in movement and subject matter due to the big cameras needed to produce them set up a distance between gallery art -which is what they are-and day-to-day reportage. The results are powerful, sometimes bleak and disengaged: that is the price of becoming art, of implying rather than depicting the human predicament, of demanding longer, slower looking from the audience (Campbell, 2009, p. 67).



Fig. 1. Kosovar children looting homes abandoned by fleeing Serbs. Yannis Kontos, Mitrovica, Kosovo, 1999. From “Yannis Kontos: Possible/Impossible, Aporias” by Moutsopoulos and Petsini (2007), Kastaniotis.

<sup>3</sup>Among them Philip Jones Griffiths, Susan Meiselas and Gilles Peress.

<sup>4</sup>The Sublime Image of Destruction—Brighton Photo Biennial 2008 Exhibition Catalog. <http://www.bpb.org.uk/file-uploads/files/file/BPB2008%20Teachers2%5B1%5D.pdf>.

In his *Critique of Judgment*, Immanuel Kant, investigating the sublime, states, “*We call that sublime which is absolutely great*” (Kant, 1790, p. 131). The term “sublime” is generally used to describe the vast, awe-inspiring greatness, power and beauty of nature. Often presenting stately, decorative, and extraordinarily beautiful views of war zone sites after the event, this strange new genre of fine art photography is an artistic response to the impact of conflict. The criticism against it is that such epic, highly aesthetic images of other peoples’ suffering are viewed purely within artistic contexts.

*The Sublime Image of Destruction* raised questions about the political meaning and efficacy of these images; it is hard to discern an overt political standpoint in some of the works. But it is the artists’ intention that it should be. With Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, there is a sophisticated understanding of how nations define themselves through images and through the interplay between the transformation and representation of the landscape.

“*A war picture can run the gamut from straight reporting through legal evidence and propaganda to art*” (Campbell, 2009, p. 69). At each step along the road, the caption changes until, in some collection of one man’s great photographs, it may dwindle down to an endnote saying when and where it was taken. Images strong enough to be seen as art tell their stories insistently. Words seem to be a distraction from the visual statement.

The exhibitions at the Barbican Gallery (2008) depicted war-related imagery. For example: “*On the Subject of War*” presented work by Geert van Kesteren (from *Why Mister, Why?* and *Baghdad Calling*; van Kesteren, 2008; van Kesteren & Hirsh, 2004), Paul Chan (*Tin Drum Trilogy*), Omer Fast (*The Casting*), and An-My Le (*29 Palms and Events Ashore*)-all with reference to military action in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Photography manuals state that it is not the camera but the person using it that matters; they are only telling part of the truth. In war, new cameras, faster emulsions, and better lenses abetted what Janet Malcolm calls “*the camera’s profound misanthropy,*” its tendency “*to show things in their worst possible aspect,*” its “*willingness to go to unpleasant places where no one wants to venture*” (Malcolm, 1990, p. 13).

“*Over the decades, war photographs by Matthew Brady, Robert Capa, Don McCullin, Larry Burrows and Philip Jones Griffiths have all followed that path. It is as though, once they become photographic art, a different response is called for. The job of reporting, politics or propaganda having been done, aesthetics can take over.*” (Campbell, 2009, pp. 69-70).

Yet recurrent arguments about famous war photographs show that even when seen coolly displayed in books and galleries, away from the magazines and newspapers where they were first exposed, a challenge to their status as evidence is effective. Was the flag actually first raised on Iwo Jima in the way the photograph suggests? It was not. Knowing that the sense the picture gives is false leaves one disappointed. Was Robert Capa’s picture of a Spanish soldier really taken at the instant a bullet felled him? It seems it almost certainly was, and that removes doubt about its status, even as art. Photography is, in that regard, different from other graphic arts. To find that Goya’s phrase “*I saw this,*” engraved under one of his etchings in *The Disasters of War*, was not strictly true would not diminish its force. It is not merely their status as evidence that sets photographs apart. Even when the subject demands evidence shown-as the friends of the girl Kontos photographed in the Iraq war-responsibility attaches to its use (see Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. 4-year-old Iraqi Zahraa (Surname not given) lies in bed suffering skin burns at the Al-Karh hospital in Baghdad. Zahraa lost her whole family when their car was hit during a coalition attack on the outskirts of Baghdad. Yannis Kontos, Baghdad, Iraq, 12 April 2003. From [yanniskontos.com](http://yanniskontos.com) (25 January 2011).

The vocabulary of taking and shooting may suggest violence, but framing a picture can do almost the opposite—disengage the photographer from the action being recorded. There are descriptions by



war photographers of being in great danger but somehow cut off from it by the very act of having to compose things in a viewfinder. To be cut off from the pain of others isn't that a moral failing? Making a living from it, at the very least by making representative icons out of individuals in times of intense suffering, can be both a kind of aggression and an act of abandonment. It sits uneasily within attitudes relating both to privacy and to the rights of the individual that are increasingly recognized and legislated for. War photographers have suggested that the stress of seeing dreadful scenes and being able to do little about them eventually manifests itself in their craft. Those who record combat while facing the same dangers as the people they photograph are less likely to be accused of voyeurism than those who, with full stomachs, coolly photograph starving children or the bereaved. Photography is much more of a performance art than the end product's resemblance to drawings and paintings might suggest. (Campbell, 2009).

Therefore, is it *right* to present images from other people's suffering as art? The media has always sought to be both disturbing and appealing. That overdose of interpretable information is the precise quality that distinguishes conflict journalism today from how it was ten years ago. Inevitably, the viewer now selects from a storm of media practitioners -perhaps a foreign TV station, bloggers, papers, an Imam's sermons on DVD-a few whose vision they trust.

Kontos's creations have always been produced within constrained contexts. He has undertaken dozens of picture assignments for magazines with objectivity and ethical dedication challenged by the restrictions of photojournalism.

It is customary to judge art in terms of intentionality; we generally conceive of artists as individuals who work in circumstances that permit them a great deal of freedom, and we consequently judge their art in terms of the degree to which they are able to realize their intentions. However, the situation with photojournalists is somewhat different. A photojournalist is a particular mixture of an artist, an artisan, and a multiskilled worker. Although self-expression is an important element in their work, they are almost always restricted by the requirement to photograph exactly what they are assigned to, at any cost or taking any risk. Furthermore, they often have little or no say about the ways in which their work is finally utilized-namely, about which images are chosen for publication from among the many they have taken, about how these are cropped or where they are placed, about the captions chosen to accompany the photos, or about the very uses of their pictures (see Fig. 3).

It is therefore argued there that photographers such as Simon Norfolk and Paul Seawright often have the freedom to choose what and how they photograph without the time constraints imposed by the necessity of "covering" a news story, an organized propaganda event, or a social event. On the contrary, it appears that they can work intensely, we should admit, for short periods of time on predetermined locations, rather than having to produce images on a daily or even weekly basis, year after year.

However, we believe some viewers will still wonder how that *commitment to engage* combines with the apparent distance -physical and emotional-the works put between themselves and their subjects. Do they still retain meaning if the message is rendered abstract and obscure by disconnection and distance? We deem it might be a matter of the habits and the constraints of museum photography. Those massive, spectacular prints that adorn museum walls are made with medium or even large-format view cameras,



Fig. 3. Albanian refugees from Kosovo begging for bread. Yannis Kontos, Blace, North Macedonia, 1999. Used on the cover of *Nouvel Observateur* in April 1999. From "Yannis Kontos: Possible/Impossible, Aporias" by Moutsopoulos and Petsini (2007), Kastaniotis.

the kind you use with a tripod and (perhaps) a cloth covering over your head. They are wonderful at capturing detail in broad scenes but generally not so successful at rendering movement close-ups, the very essence of photojournalism. If people do appear, they tend to be immobile and/or distant.

Here, technical constraints and some ideological suspicion of too overt an engagement come together to produce that *abstract disconnection*. Such works may carry meanings that can be quite variable. Perhaps they run the risk that in drawing on the sublime and on distancing, they produce a view in which the artist stands above and outside any conflict and merely reports on it, almost as though it were a natural phenomenon.

*“Transforming is what art does, but photography that bears witness to the calamitous and the reprehensible is much criticized if it seems ‘aesthetic.’ That is, too much like art. Photographs that depict suffering should not be beautiful, and captions should not moralize. In this view, a beautiful photograph drains attention from the sobering subject and turns it toward the medium itself, thereby compromising the picture’s status as a document.”* (Sontag, 2002, p. 94).

*“To suffer is one thing; another thing is living with the photographed images of suffering, which does not necessarily strengthen conscience and the ability to be compassionate; it can also corrupt them.”* (Sontag, 1979, p. 20).

One of these artists, Simon Norfolk (see *Balloon Vendor, Afghanistan, 2002*, for an example), has also worked as a photojournalist. One of the reasons they have moved towards the art world is because their work has been frozen out of the mass media. Giving priority to aesthetic concerns may compromise ethical or journalistic content.

Aestheticism is difficult to avoid, even in photojournalism. One of the striking contrasts in the photography on show in Brighton Photo Biennial 2008 is that between the aesthetics of North Vietnamese photographers and their Western counterparts. The former were influenced by the French Humanist movement: their work has a very lyrical component, rather reminiscent of the work of Robert Doisneau or Willy Ronis. However, Western photographers-influenced by Garry Winogrand, Lee Friedlander, William Klein, and Robert Frank-had a stronger photojournalistic aspect in their work. Theirs was a very different style-but still an aesthetic style. Simon Norfolk’s defense of his own work, for instance, is that people are drawn in by the beauty of it. Later, they realize, as they continue to look-because these photographs encourage sustained looking-another, more political message emerges (Sontag, 1979).

The photojournalistic tradition exemplified by the star photographers of the Vietnam War who seemed to offer unmediated truth involved, one now sees, exercises in visual rhetoric. Such photographers used compositional habits that can be tracked back through Goya or Delacroix. They are true in their own way, touching and wonderful, but not visually innocent. (Campbell, 2009).

In terms of the spectrum between the artist and the photojournalist movements, considering their contributors, I would position myself somewhere in the middle since it is the photojournalists’ work that moves me most, but I also strongly believe that photojournalism is an art, being an expressive form, not technique. Photojournalism deals with ethical dilemmas, while art and aftermath photography retain the right to be distant. Nonetheless, the story must be told, and we both tell stories based on concrete ideological values. Aftermath photography’s aesthetic priority gives the author room for objectivity. Yet, while objectivity is non-debatable, the image’s beauty is. If beauty is the tool to transform a war picture into an “art object,” then this can be considered unethical.

But is war representation intended for rarefied viewing in a museum or on the wall of some rich collector? If that is true, then why should photojournalism be excluded? Photojournalism frequently presents ugly truths with such beauty! Quoting Magnum photographer Paulo Pellegrin:

*“Form and composition are the ‘tools’ of photographic vision, and in this respect, they can and should be used to produce powerful images. I am not disturbed by beautiful images; on the contrary, I think a good image has a greater potential to make an impact.”* (Pellegrin, 2010, p. 37).

Sontag claimed that “*beautifying*” in photography “*tends to bleach out a moral response to what is shown*” (Sontag, 2004, p. 72). Even if the photographer’s express intention is to arouse indignation at injustice, will the beauty of a picture instead transmute the sorrow of the subject into the pleasure of satisfaction of others? (Reinhardt, 2007).

If aftermath photography serves as an aesthetic form of communication, there is no issue. Disengagement is the keyword, and since both movements provoke discussions, they both raise a problem: “There are certainly times or ways in which turning the suffering of another human being into a beautiful or formally elegant image seems somehow indecent” (Reinhardt, 2007, p. 19).

Photojournalism, as an art, practices a form of aesthetics connected to not only pleasing the eye but also providing the viewer with a context for understanding the world around us in unique ways. Many photojournalists learn early on that the pictures they make are obliged to conform to the expectations of the public. In recent years, the introduction of digital technologies has challenged long-standing beliefs and codes of conduct associated with ethical photojournalistic norms. At the same time, the

proliferation of digital photography on the internet, as well as the economic pressures placed on news organizations through media consolidation and corporate downsizing, tests not only ethical principles but aesthetic concerns as well.

Today's photojournalism, it is sometimes argued, is far more visually sophisticated than their predecessors, ferrying around a 4 × 5 Graflex camera and a pocket full of flash bulbs. Tolerance for staged images that lack visual impact is far less acceptable today than it was even 20 years ago. Pictures, therefore, must do more than simply inform; they must also please. Today, photographers appear to be taking more aesthetic chances, which moves them further away from the realm of journalism and into the realm of art.

However, many readers do not want or even expect their news to be arty—they have been trained to think that is not what journalism is about. Unfortunately, in today's hyper-media world, the pressure is not only to inform but also to entertain. Therefore, when a news picture is treated as art so as to distinguish it from other media, the public may actually see the effort as a gimmick or, even worse, as a disingenuous attempt to sensationalize the news.

The tools photojournalists use in composing images—selective focus, framing, use of light, and movement—all conform to a photojournalistic grammar, one that seeks to convey immediacy, intensity, and intimacy. This grammar, or the system of structural relationships employed in constructing meaning in a picture, is one of the things that distinguish photojournalism from other genres:

“A fine photojournalist plants one foot firmly within the visual pursuit of objective reality as we know it . . . keenly aware of a role as a professional eyewitness . . . But a great photojournalist also plants the other foot firmly within the subjective experience, with its passion, dedication, artistry, and drive to document people at their best and worst—and often with a clear point of view and at great sacrifice.” (Newton, 2001, p. 52).

“The work of the photojournalist abounds with an apparent realism [ . . . ] the result is an everyday, seemingly transparent, aesthetic realism dropping into our homes in a steady drip of blood, smiles, tears, triumph, and sorrow. The point of visual reportage is realism, not art. Yet, often, art is created in the process and is what makes an image of photojournalism compelling.” (Newton, 2001, p. 52).

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

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