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WAR AND CONFLICT THROUGH MAGNUM'S EYES

BARBIE ZELIZER

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Pictures of war and conflict are among the most powerful visuals known to humankind. Using the camera's cool mechanics to depict the hot passions generated by injustice, suffering, brutality, and death, they display much of what the world prefers left unseen—the crumbling of the weak, the brutality of the strong, ravaged landscapes, suffering victims, irrevocably corrupt orders. Distances between us and them, here and there, now and then, right and wrong, good and evil, safety and danger—which balloon wildly out of control in times of war and conflict—are compressed into simple, abstract visual cues for one brief moment in time. Emblematizing what Henri Cartier-Bresson famously called shots of "decisive moments," these pictures encapsulate whole cultures, orders of being, and sequences of action associated with harm's way and the potential—or lack thereof—for its repair.

Magnum's pictures of war and conflict are no exception. Charting the impulses of war and conflict for sixty-odd years across multiple continents, Magnum's photographers navigate the tension between photojournalism and art by offering new ways of articulating a visual point of view about discord, a moral perspective on injustice, an emotional engagement with suffering. They confront the horrors and brutalities of war and conflict at the same time as they ponder and often challenge the humanity, sacrifice, and contradiction resonant in their settings. What do their images look like? And how are they sustained?

CREATING AN INSTITUTIONAL LENS ON WAR AND CONFLICT

The singular impact of pictures of war and conflict has long drawn from their recognition as particularly powerful vehicles of photojournalism. Like other kinds of images, photographs of war and conflict engage their viewers in memorable ways, playing upon multiple levels of contingency so as to capture public engagement with what is wrong with the world and stimulate its imagination about how that wrong might be righted.[1] Easy to access due to their affective memorability, they freeze time in a way thought to bypass the intellect and communicate directly with the emotions. Captured in a material form that viewers can revisit at will, pictures of war and conflict are somehow bigger than images of stability. Drawing upon the dissonance at their core, they are often bolder and more exaggerated, appear more frequently, highlight more memorable and dramatic scenes, appeal to higher orders of aesthetic shock and pleasure. Images of war and conflict, like images more generally, gravitate toward composite views of discord that are often conventionalized, simplified, and more schematic than detailed. For, as Magnum photographer Gilles Peress observed, there is always a "disjunction between available languages and reality."[2]

[OPPOSITE]

FIGURE 2.1
Marilyn Silverstone. A village in Southern Vietnam seen from an American military helicopter, 1966.

What happens in situations of war and conflict is never clear-cut. That makes the image's dual play to denotation—the ability to show the world as it is—and to connotation—the ability to frame the world in ways consonant with larger meaning—critical.[3] Over the decades of Magnum's evolution, its pictures of war and conflict have tended to use denotation in the service of connotation. In Magnum photographer Abbas's words, "I am interested in the world, sure, but also in my vision of the world . . . I try to show my point of view."[4] For that reason, Magnum photos tend to push viewers toward taking a position on what they see, even though its complexity does not get ironed out with depiction. "There is no point in pressing the shutter," remarked Magnum photographer Philip Jones Griffiths, "unless you are making some caustic comment on the incongruities of life."[5]

Consider the picture taken by Marilyn Silverstone, a shot that emphasizes the sheer reducibility of war and conflict but does so in provocative ways (Figure 2.1).

Taken in 1966 aboard an American military helicopter over Vietnam in the midst of that country's sixteen-year war, the image resonates more broadly than what it depicts. Though it shows a weapon of aggression—a loaded machine gun—surveying a nondescript territory below, the kind of action it depicts—a budding conflict, an ongoing war, or a serendipitous terrorist action?—and in which part of the world seem almost inconsequential. The photo's message appears to rest on its most obvious visual parameters: The camera foregrounds the machine gun, and the village below, blurred and made tiny by aerial distance, remains a possibly unknowing target of surveillance, protection, or aggression. But an ancillary connotative message, carried atop the photo's denotative relay, offers an equally clear moral perspective through which to engage with the depiction. The towering size of the weapon, scaled larger by its juxtaposition with the miniscule buildings underneath, suggests a visual corollary about the single-mindedness of war and conflict, by which one's own vantage point necessarily dwarfs the size, scale, magnitude, humanity, and justness of the other side in order to prosecute action. How else is it possible to intentionally inflict violence on others? That barbarism of war and conflict was not lost on Silverstone, who was later rumored to have left photography to become a Buddhist nun because she loathed the tragedies she was repeatedly forced to depict.

War and conflict have always been at the heart of the Magnum enterprise. Since its inception in the 1940s, when a group of Left-leaning photographers formed their own picture-taking cooperative to help fight fascism after World War II, Magnum strived to provide clear portrayals that could be free of the strictures associated with organizational loyalty, bureaucratic obstruction, and military censorship. According to Michael Ignatieff, "Magnum grew out of what World War II did to the men and women who photographed it. . . . Magnum belongs to that moment of renewal," in large part found in the aftermath of the Nazi concentration camps.[6] War and conflict remained central targets of attention not only because two of its founding members—Robert Capa and George Rodger—had already earned kudos for war photographs largely taken under the purview of *Life* magazine, but because war and conflict inevitably ranked uppermost among public events worthy of being photographed. From Erich Lessing and the 1956 Hungarian uprising to James Nachtwey and Rwanda of the 1990s, Magnum photographers have wanted control of their photos—organizationally, institutionally, politically, and economically—so as to give them the widest possible audience. Driven by a "pragmatic determination to be free—free from dependence on any one client and free to choose their own stories and the manner in which they would be told,"[7] they found that perhaps nowhere were the stakes higher for such independence than when photographing war and conflict. And because the use of pictures depends not so much on explicit and articulated standards as on informal collective judgments among photographers about how best to use them, the shared demeanor of Magnum photographers has gone a long way toward shaping the pictures that ensued under its signature.

Photos of war and conflict have thus constituted a thriving staple of the collective's archive. As Russell Miller told it, its photographers repeatedly wondered "how many people have to die for someone to become a member of Magnum?"[8] Such loss, of course, was borne out over time, as when Robert Capa died covering the First Indochina War in 1954, Werner Bischof died nine days earlier in the Andes, and David Seymour perished while covering the Suez War in 1956. This continued as recently as April 2011, when Tim Hetherington was killed while covering the conflict in Libya.[9]

Though pictures of war and conflict have generally tended not to depict human gore, one's own dead or