

The beautification of photojournalism

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This article by Polis Summer School student Aylin Elci.

As the cliche goes, “a photo is worth a thousand words”, but what are consequences of using “pretty”, “highly aesthetic” or “artistic” photos to convey the reality of war?

In 1972, Pulitzer-prize-awardee-to-be Nick Ut immortalized a nine-year-old Vietnamese girl running away from a cloud of napalm in a world-renowned photo. At that time, press coverage of war had little or no military restrictions and to the despair of some – the American government – war was reported unreservedly.



Today, with few exceptions such as the gruesome coverage of the 2006 Lebanon war, war reporting is dominated, censored and controlled by military and government. This protective strategy is upheld despite the on going debate of knowing which photographs convey the reality of war best: the graphic or the beautiful ones?

Regardless one still needs to photograph and as fervent photojournalist Robert Nickelsberg exclaimed in a recent talk about his experience in Afghanistan: “You had to embed and you also had to deal with seeing only 50%. What are [were] you going to do? Nothing?”

Is this so called beautification of war a consequence of the firm handed grip officials have on war zones? Is the mainstream media conspiring with them and favouring bloodless silhouettes of heroic soldiers watching the Syrian sunset? I think neither. I believe that the move towards beautification is because of a developing compassion fatigue. Just like the changes in charity imagery to improve fundraising, I believe that photos of people being pulled from debris have provoked a general disinterest – as long as the event doesn’t take place in an “elite country” as journalism bible “Manufacturing Consent” preaches.

Besides, this trend isn’t going unnoticed: although he recently ventured again in Syria at age 77, war reporting’s prominent figure Don McCullin insists in an interview with the Guardian that “Nobody wants to look at spreads of dying children. They want to see higher heels. It’s all gone celebrity, hasn’t it? Celebrity, looks, fashion.”

One only needs to take a look at what experts say. World Press Photo – the Oscars of photojournalism – 2013

awardee Paul Hansen's photo of men carrying dead bodies of children in Gaza was probably the most criticised entry ever. Hansen who was accused of having manipulated the image on Photoshop was later cleared of 'only' heavily editing the image.



In short, the photographer greatly post-produced the image to make it beautiful – especially the lighting. The 2014 World Press Photo of the year on the other hand depicts African migrants, phone in hand, trying to get signal on a summer's night. The photo has many of the beautification standards: moonlight, silhouettes and a nice deep blue.

If this prestigious prize rewards these images, what is it really looking for? Beauty? Or reality? Although the answer is probably mixed, there is no doubt the changing standards of journalism and photography are affecting the core actors: the photojournalists.



Hence, it doesn't come as a surprise that legendary photojournalist James Nachtwey – especially known for his reporting of the Rwandan genocide and the Bosnian war – shoots carefully arranged photographs of merciless president Bachar al-Assad and his family for – surprise! – Vogue. These photos, which were taken shortly before mayhem in Syria and which have since been removed from the fashion magazine's website, make me wonder: did Nachtwey feel like he had to shoot beautiful photos? Did he forget about his once so strong ethics and standards? Or did he simply do it for media attention? One thing is for sure, the images show a very hard to believe reality and one should be genuinely worried when war photojournalists begin to blur the lines between truth and aesthetics.

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