PHOTOGRAPHY'S FALSE PROMISE

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David Cotterrell discusses the abstraction of distance and the dislocation of ideas. From the comfort of knowing in London to the disconnection of the frontline in Afghanistan and back again for an image-frenzied art public in Britain, he offers a personal perspective on the image, the lens and the implicit lie of the narrative structure.

Fig.1. Sightlines, 2009, David Cotterrell, C-Type Print. © 2009 David Cotterrell.

Fig.2. Green Room, 2009, David Cotterrell, HD Video, 22mins. © 2009 David Cotterrell.

Fig.3. Supernumerary, 2009, David Cotterrell, C-Type Print. © 2009 David Cotterrell.

As I traveled from Brize Norton in rural Oxfordshire to the Commando base at Sangin in Helmand Province, my view shifted from a media-informed assumption of global understanding to a diminishing, narrowing perspective. I had printed internet-sourced maps of Helmand, bought a 'Lonely Planet' guide to Afghanistan and attended military briefings in Yorkshire. The morning of my departure I read a copy of The Guardian, loaded my camera gear into an army-surplus Bergen and entered the military environment via a C-17 Globemaster.

Arriving in Kandahar 24 hours later, I was taken to Regional Command South, where I was guided through maps of the war as defined by British engagement. Kabul did not appear on these charts. I progressed to Camp Bastion (this time by the smaller Hercules transport plane) and my new home, 201 Field Hospital. At 'Prayers', the morning intelligence briefing, an annotated chart covered the table. As well as the familiar battlefields of Kajaki and Sangin, it had the names of places I hadn't seen on any of my printed maps: 'Bryce', 'Delhi', 'Dwyer' and 'Inkerman'. The map was centred on our current location, with concentric circles emanating from the hospital. No miles were marked – distances were now measured in Chinook flight-times.

I was amazed by the detail of briefings: suicide bombers tailing convoys were described, the locations and probability of attacks over the coming 12 hours were declared, but the world beyond a forty-minute flight was no longer referenced. The last news I had seen included reports of the potential for martial law being declared in Pakistan. We heard rumours of problems in the country as our breakfast milk supply had dried up – the result of Taliban ambushes on supply convoys crossing the border.

I decided to try to find a newspaper. Post did come to Bastion, but had to compete for space with ammunition, medical supplies, reinforcements and military equipment, so the papers I found all preceded my arrival.

Two weeks later, I had been unsettled by the claustrophobia of Bastion and the death and injury I witnessed. I begged passage on a Chinook, first to Lash-Kagar, then onwards to Sangin. While Lash-Kagar offered the welcome opportunity to discuss the abstraction of political challenges to governance and progression with Foreign and Commonwealth Office officials, Sangin was a forward base occupying contested territory in the poppy-growing region, populated by 40Commando's 'Bravo' Company and a mortar team from the Coldstream Guards.

My ambiguous status (I had been awarded the title of 'Major' in order to travel with the Army, but was an odd addition to the military with my ponytail) enabled my attendance at intelligence briefings. These still lasted an hour, but the scope was further reduced: the horizon now was not flight-times but the range of foot-patrols. We knew the names of the Taliban commanders who were camped on the hills around us and were even aware of rumours of rivalries and intrigue amongst them. Within a couple of kilometers we had a vivid detailed mental picture. The rest of the world, Kabul and even Kandahar, was now abstracted beyond comprehension.

I remained in Sangin until the end of November, stranded as helicopters were diverted to support the attack on Musa-Kala. I had to wait until my return to the UK to read news more current than the date of my departure a month earlier. I discovered that Pakistan hadn't yet descended into chaos after all and only one of the soldiers that I had witnessed being injured had made it into the press-released history of the conflict.

I had an interesting challenge on returning from Afghanistan. I had travelled as a 'War Artist' in an attempt to investigate the apparent ethical contradictions between Medicine and War. I now had a thousand images of conflict and its bloody aftermath and was invited to present work in a public exhibition concerning the subject. Outwardly, this might appear to be a simple problem of editing and selection. Inwardly, I was struggling with what I had experienced, as well as witnessed.

I was asked to offer an independent observer's view of the trauma of front-line field hospitals, the ecological impact of conflict, the role of NGOs in construction and masterplanning within transitional environments (amongst other subjects that I am under-qualified to offer expert analyses upon). After the novelty of my experiences had been exposed, documented and discussed, I was asked to explain how a tangential and aberrant experience such as that offered to 'War Artists' can be reconciled with a longer-term practice as an artist.

With no great confidence, but with some intuitive feeling, I said that I had recognised a few parallels.

I had realised, as I tried to recount my journey in a chronological narrative, prompted by my projected photographs and the memory of my scribbled diary, that one of the most profound experiences of advancing forward through the military supply-lines was of a gradual disengagement with any perceivable macro-picture of context.

When required to contribute to the canon of mediated knowledge and demonstrate my understanding of truth to a wider audience, I chose to speak from the vocabulary of received secondary experience. Perhaps a focus on the dramatic and catastrophic impact of violence on the human body would have been appropriate. This aspect of war was vividly documented within the record of my time in the Afghan operating theatres. But this imagery, which I recognised as representative in my research in the UK, was not congruent with my memories of Afghanistan. The images I held in my memory were of gore and despair, but the traumatic nature of my recollections was not rooted in the inherent shock of the visual. The distance I was feeling from my colleagues, friends and family on my return to England was due to a memory of the calm, silent and slow experience of isolation, disorientation and uncertainty, which I had perceived to pervade the open-ended narratives that begin at the moment of injury. Media images of guns being fired, protest placards of bloody injuries and the smug ironies of contemporary art statements, focusing on digestible, if unpalatable, ideas that could offer mass gratification, failed to offer a fellowship with my private demons.

I chose to make work that deliberately denied the salacious appetite for drama. The work was to focus on the mundane, abstracted and ambiguous experiences that remain un-newsworthy: the interminable, night-time evacuation flights, the uncertain waiting for casualties, the abstraction of trauma through codified military terminology and the administrative burden of death and injury. When previewed, my responses naturally bemused some cultural commentators. While war correspondents, serving soldiers, recent casualties, veteran doctors and nurses seemed to empathise with the material I had introduced to the public domain, there was a palpable sense of disappointment from the art journalists who had visited the work seeking a satisfying and definitive response.

Writing in *Art Monthly*, one journalist appeared to lament the restraint with which the artwork addressed (or denied) the emotive potential of the traumatic first-hand experience. Having read my diary extracts reprinted in The Guardian, he was aware of the material potentially available for synthesis into statements for art-world consumption. Yet, the work presented offered nothing but a bleak and

uneventful representation of the period before and after the politically sensitive and personally devastating experience of military injury.

The parallels with my existing practice, identified while cathartically recounting my journey through the casualty chain of Afghanistan in front of a London audience, were not derived from the extremity of experience, a political critique or of a relationship to process. Rather, the congruity that I felt with my longer-term artistic practice was with a realisation of the consistency of fragmentation between personal and collective narratives. The illusion of linear history has been well-explored through the writings of Christopher Hill and other left-wing historians, who acknowledged that a national history could only ever be an illusory approximation superimposed across disparate local experiences.

I found in Afghanistan that immersing myself in the reality of an experience previously perceived from a mediated distance naturally led to the collapse of the authority of the summary analysis. The reduction of contextual peripheral vision appeared directly proportional to the increasingly vivid primary experience of conflict. The dramas and rationales for policies, campaigns and battles fragmented to become visible only as contradictory, arbitrary violent incidents. As empathy was gained with individuals, faith in the ability of history or politics to transmit the rationale for, or the reality of, suffering appeared to dissolve.

The contradiction between the macro and first-person view, which I had previously assumed to pervade all experience of politics, urbanization and domestic life, had been the subject of my practice on a regular basis: I had developed work to address the abstraction of planning and urban analyses. While recognising that slogans and statistical data were unlikely to represent my personal experience of love, life or bereavement, I had still naively consumed the comforting, iconic summaries offered by the media; had unconsciously accepted a seductive documentary response to aspects of life that I had previously challenged.

The cinematic documentary view, or Kino-Eye, has an internal logic, but like the rules of perspective within two-dimensional drawing, does not provide a record of reality as much as an alternate construct. The lens offers a virtual world devoid of experience. It shows us too much – flattening perception and reducing the impact of all information to a common level. We survey rather than engage. Photographic composition offers a perceived hierarchy of characters and events. We are guided to the dominant narratives through the editing of footage and denied the more mundane sub-plots hidden beyond the camera's depth of field.

The fixed frame of content within the rectangle of the screen is reminiscent of the aesthetics of memory, but it doesn't replicate corresponding subjective emotional states. While photographs illustrate a visual record of the world, the sustained roving of gaze, focus and the dominance of analysis, they do not automatically transmit a state of terror, melancholia, or sublime, which may have been tagged in our memory with reference to an original image.

Instead of abandoning the fallacy of the format, we are encouraged through the dominance of media delivery mechanisms to work within the frame, to allow visual material to dominate sensual understanding and to seek to deliver content which references and perhaps challenges the precedents and conventions of the medium, rather than challenging the validity of the format itself.

I felt that to actually focus on the reality of a moment, a level of manipulation, intervention and perhaps even fiction, might be required. *Green Room* is a small video question – one of a series generated in response to the problematic experience of being a witness in Afghanistan.

The film recorded preparations for the arrival of multiple casualties during a major incident, but it is not pure documentary. I had set the camera up on a tripod within the recovery ward, unsure whether I would be able to cope with the events that were about to transpire. It offered a substitute witness that could offer an objective position from which to review the narrative at a later date.

In fact, I had managed to be present for the treatment of wounded and had travelled with them to operating theatres and through the initial stages of their onward evacuation. The camera's silent role appeared to have been unnecessary. It wasn't until much later, when I returned to England, that I looked at the tape.

The narrative is clear. Nothing appears to happen until the sound of helicopters beyond the tented hospital is heard and British and Afghan soldiers and civilians, strapped to gurneys, begin to arrive. The clinical environment is overwhelmed by the dust of the desert, the armoured medical escorts and the steady, urgent response of the surgical teams to the challenges confronting them. Had I been behind the camera, I would have determined the lens's focus.

The camera had been set to record with the maximum depth of field and neutrally surveyed the interior. The apparently unimportant activity in the background was also rendered visible: the anxiety of observers as they waited to be instrumentalised; the attempts at levity to distract from the bleak anticipation; the shift of focus as they viewed the enormity of their imminent task. I chose to direct attention by reinstating a limited depth of field on what I believed were equally important but naturally overlooked aspects of the traumatic experience.

The manipulation of view takes place after the fact: a simple post-production device is used to selectively deny focus. The loss of definition thwarts our natural desire to understand the dominant narrative. We are left with sharp images of the mundane, the redundant and the waiting. I had interfered with the documentary record and manipulated the footage.

For me, this had been one of the most profound realisations of my time in Afghanistan: despite recognising the aesthetics and contextual references through media familiarity, I had failed to remind myself that the gradual assumption of knowledge gained from exposure to synthesised reality rarely prepares the viewer for the inevitable contradiction between mediated and primary participation. I was reminded of conversations with my grandfather, who often told me that war was mainly boredom, punctuated by brief periods of fear. However, I had not understood that the undocumented intervals between dramatic events were also dominant and emotionally charged experiences.

Rather than remain satisfied with a synthetic alternative, artists need to challenge our media to regain the initial experience. By accepting the impossibility of providing an objective macro-view and by considering the limitations of the documentary witness, perhaps we can compensate for the inherent error of the Kino Eye, its false narratives and its great illusion of truth.

References and Notes:

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