

Realism & Photojournalism

How Berthold Brecht's quote on realism is interpreted in Tim Hetherington's war photography and Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin's exploration of war.

Introduction

The term reality is often used to define common sense, to define what is true from the perspective of the masses. Detached realism portrays a thing as genuinely and objectively as possible. Nothing should be glossed over, or idealized in this philosophical construct. Attached realism is a concept of visual storytelling that constantly blurs fiction with our real-world and challenges the perception of it. The evidence of truth within this perception, on the other side, lies in the duty of science. Due to its appearance, abstract fiction often seems more real than concrete science and eventually, the same fiction becomes for some reality.

The concept of realism has been discussed by knowledgeable writers, bright philosophers, and sophisticated intellectuals in the past, among others, Bertolt Brecht. Brecht thought intensively about the concept of realism, how it is perceived by the masses and how it changes over time. Brecht's quote is a personal statement. It is politically motivated, as Brecht was himself. In the following essay, the quote will be adapted to documentary photography and photojournalism. Originally it refers to literature, although Brecht wrote extensively about photography and its effects on the real world, so it might not be too far-fetched.

"With the people struggling and changing reality before our eyes, we must not cling to 'tried' rules of narrative, venerable literary models, eternal aesthetic laws. We must not derive realism as such from particular existing works, but we shall use every means, old

and new, tried and untried, derived from art and derived from other sources, to render reality to men in a form they can master ... Our concept of realism must be wide and political, sovereign over all conventions“ (Brecht 1938).

This essay will examine the concept of realism in the context of two photographic projects, which could not be more distinct from each other in their process and visual identity. Both were created in 2008 to reflect on the on-going war in Afghanistan.

Tim Hetherington is *the* definition of a conflict photographer in the classic sense, one who emerges with the troops to show their brutal, sweaty and abandoned reality. Whereas Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin are artists working with the genre of photography who use the machinery of the military, but stay outside its influence and the life of the soldiers. These definitions are valid in terms of these two projects, as Hetherington also has another approach to the brutality of war, but for clarity his other concepts are not considered.

There will be blood. Hetherington's work displays U.S. soldiers in Korangal Valley, which was considered one of the most fiercely contested areas of the war in Afghanistan. This essay will focus on Hetherington's series "Sleeping Soldiers", which he photographed while staying in outposts in the Korangal Valley.

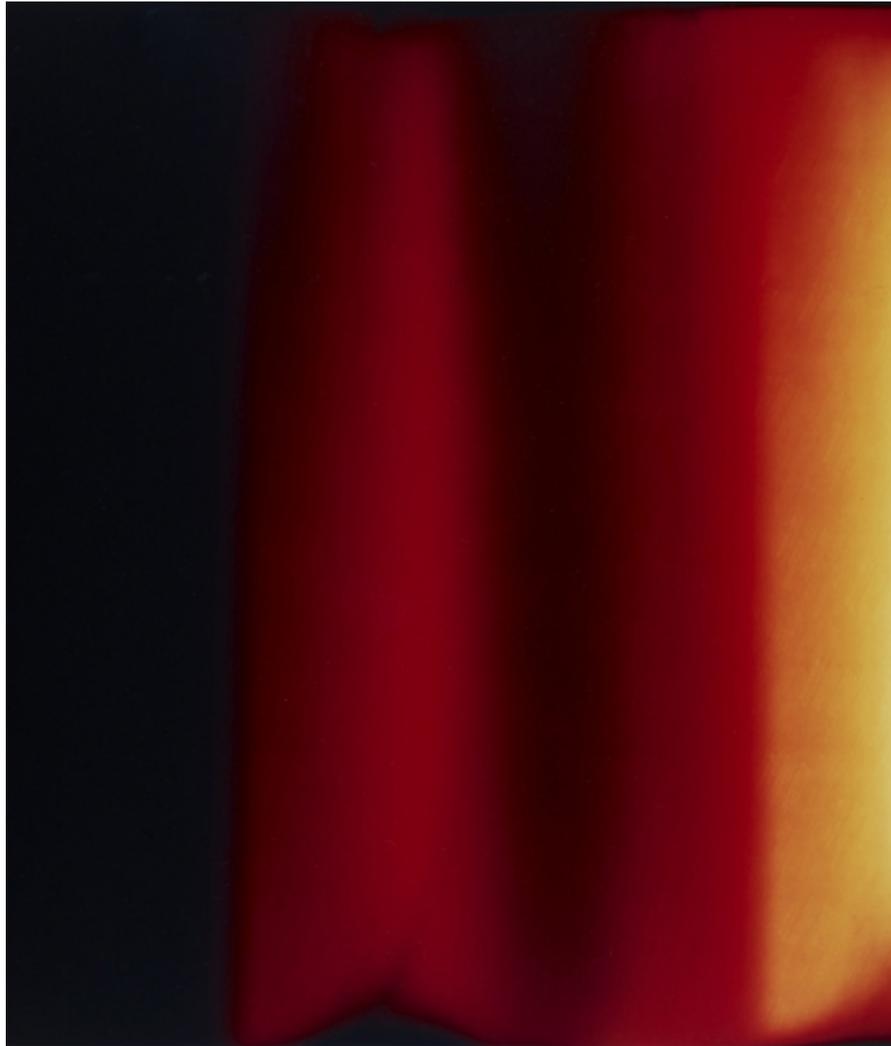
Hetherington's approach is understood as 'documentary photography or photojournalism', where essential information is shown within the photograph and extended through captions. The space for interpretation is limited. One assumes that the relationship between the soldiers and Hetherington was very close, as the photos show a different side of the war. Without the uniform and captions, one would hardly grasp that these young soldiers are within the struggle of war. The photographs radiate silence.



Tim Hetherington. "Doc' Kelso sleeping," 2008.

There will be light. Broomberg & Chanarin recorded the project "The Day Nobody Died", which captured the reality at the front line of Helmand Province, Afghanistan, in a particular and unique way. It turned out that the month Broomberg & Chanarin stayed in Helmand Province would have been the deadliest of the war. Broomberg & Chanarin¹ "approached the Ministry of Defence and lied to them, claiming [they] were photojournalists" (Tate 2015).

¹ In this essay Broomberg & Chanarin are referred to as photographers or photojournalists, as that is what they told the Ministry of Defence, rather than saying they are artists, how they refer to themselves on their homepage.



Broomberg & Chanarin, A. & O. . "The Brothers Suicide." 2008.

Broomberg & Chanarin approached the deadliest month of the war differently. They took “in place of their cameras, a roll of photographic paper 50 metres long and 76.2 centimetres wide contained in a simple, lightproof cardboard box and exposed six meters of the photographic paper for 20 seconds on a daily basis to light” (Broomberg & Chanarin 2008). The project criticizes contemporary methods of embedded conflict photography, whereas the evidence, critique, and understanding of the project itself are achieved through the process of recording, travelling and filming, rather than the produced images themselves. The images radiate obscurity.

This essay will explore and explain in more detail what might be the intentions of both projects, and how Hetherington and Broomberg & Chanarin define realism for themselves, and what it says about the reality of the war in Afghanistan.

Realism & The Particular

Reality is changing. Reality never stays stagnant as it is influenced by the world around it, and this world is in a constant state of flux. The perception of reality by the time a photographic essay is produced, recorded, or published might be twofold. Brecht discussed reality as perceived by the wide masses, but where does the creator stand in this queue. The majority of the population defines what reality or common sense is, but it is in a constant transition, thus reality is also discontinuous (Lukacs 1938).

This discontinuity of realism as a concept and reality as the status quo, can be observed in the projects of Hetherington and Broomberg & Chanarin. Both photographic essays define reality within a similar geographical landscape, around the same time, and more importantly, the same context – the context of war. Although the process and the outcome are completely different, both have value and convey a message.

Hetherington photographed the reality of daily life in the Korangal Valley and attempted to illustrate to the audience, how night and day for the soldiers stationed in this part of the world is. However, Hetherington creates a second layer of reality, semi-detached from the war, when he showed sleeping soldiers. The viewer distinguishes these photographs and is overwhelmed by the youth and vulnerability of the soldiers. Hetherington also used this material to create a video installation. He did not derive realism from existing works, rather he created a second-layer of the existing reality.

Broomberg & Chanarin on the other hand, detach reality from the concept of realism, when the viewer focuses just on the produced images. One would not understand the concept and daily life of war when looking solely at the photographs, nor do the captions create an understanding. One would not assume that they were driving within a heavily armoured vehicle surrounded by soldiers, using that vehicle as a camera to let light shine onto their photographic paper.

Render & Reality

By displaying the sleeping soldiers in the photographs, Hetherington “renders reality to men in a form they can master” (Brecht 1938). The public knowledge can be referred to as ‘Studium’ (Barthes 1981). The masses can easily connect a sleeping soldier with innocence. A soldier who sleeps cannot kill, nor is he or she an active part of the war in that particular moment. Hetherington connects the audience and the content of his photographs with common sense. The message also relates to the ‘symbolic image’, whereas the first message can be seen literally as the ‘sleeping soldier’, and the second symbolically as ‘innocence’ (Barthes 1977).

On the contrary Broomberg & Chanarin work on a different level, with different methods to render their form of realism. Reality and truth are two hypotheses that often go along with each other; yet they are not absolute, rather fluid. Broomberg & Chanarin made the process of their work visible to the audience and transparent to understand their reality. This process does not only strengthen the concept of truth, but is needed to explain the content of their images. Just with the film and the overall construct at the exhibition made the work accessible to the general public.

The general public, as assumed, finds more interest in the imagery that has clarity, whilst artistic images often have to be explained. They leave space for interpretation, misunderstanding, and foster no guidance. Therefore, they are more likely to cause confusion and misconception, as language is needed to master the meaning. Broomberg & Chanarin included additional text, video and discussion, as a layer to make reality understood for the audience.

Hetherington's 'Studium' might have a second layer of interpretation added to his images called 'Punctum', which refers to the personal experience one can have from a photograph, and that is rather individual (Barthes 1981). Therefore, assuming that the images of Broomberg & Chanarin have no Studium, and maybe as well no Punctum.

Concept & Realism

When Brecht stated that "our concept of realism must be wide and political, sovereign over all conventions", one might wonder what he meant (Brecht 1938). Especially in the context of the previous line, where he explained that the concept of realism has to be rendered so that the wide masses can grasp the meaning. In this constellation, it can be seen as an oxymoron. If the concept of realism has to be rendered to be mastered, it cannot be undefined wide, political, and sovereign over all conventions at the same time. Brecht defined the mass of people as "the class which offers the broadest solutions for the pressing difficulties in which human society is caught up" (Brecht 1938). By referring to the broadest solutions, Brecht meant the middle class rather than the elite, therefore the concept of realism has to be limited to be mastered by the wider audience. Transferred to photography, limitation of the interpretation, clarity, and definition of reality is necessary to be understood by the general public.

This wide concept of realism and its apparent limitation of access can be explained in Broomberg & Chanarin's 'The Day Nobody Died'. Within the frame of the images and the captions, one can only guess what has happened that particular day. Adding the presence of video, audio and performance within an exhibition, the work goes beyond what it was intended to do. The audience will understand the system of creation, which nevertheless leaves space for interpretation. Due to the spectacularity alone, the project pushes itself away from conventional photography and photojournalism. As a matter of fact, the British Army pushed Broomberg & Chanarin briskly out of Helmand, when they figured out that they were not doing conventional war photography (Dixon 2011). In creating their own war reality, a new space for discussion was opened, but also harshly criticized as a 'conceptual joke', and 'patronizing and arrogant' (O'Hagan 2012).

Hetherington's 'Sleeping Soldiers' is a series within the photographs of "Restrepo Outpost, Korangal Valley" which he made in Helmand Afghanistan. It shows one part of the reality of war, but does not add another conceptual layer. In that sense, it is clearly understood by the masses and expands beyond known principles of 'conflict' photography. One can observe that the system of embedding makes the reality of the soldiers' Hetherington's reality – it merges.

The merging of the presentation of each project makes the audience understand the concept of realism Hetherington and Broomberg & Chanarin created, yet the latter leaves a gap. Nevertheless, Brecht understood realism as a fluid concept. It is a concept that should be changed, challenged, and steadily adapted to a context in which reality is present.

Narrative & Reality

A narrative is more compelling if the concept of realism is understood, and vice versa. The reality of most people is set by the repetition of existing structures and patterns. This is true

for their daily life, but also in the understanding of storytelling. It always seems odd if known principles are broken and challenged, as one must learn to understand again.

Hetherington's series of the sleeping soldiers in Korangal Valley uses a clear image one can understand, at the same time being in one of the most contested and deadliest areas of the Afghan war, his images show the opposite of the extreme. In his whole body of work of this area, the most well-known photographs depict ordinary situations in an extraordinary environment, where every wrong step could mean death. Still his photographs depict intimacy and empathy. His photographs show his attachment to the soldiers, reflecting the 15 months he spent in Afghanistan. He uses conventional photography to show a different narrative inside the spectrum of war.

Broomberg & Chanarin's capturing of light rays on their photographic paper each day follows another approach. They state from the very beginning that the month they arrived was the deadliest of the war. Even though the images don't depict atrocity, the captions of each frame seem like the headlines in a newspaper in which the following article tells the story of war. Due to their approach, the observer cannot connect with their eyes to the emotions, the intimacy, and the comradeship of war. They are detached, observer and the images. Whereas war is not present pictorially, it is figuratively. They use different photography to show a conventional narrative inside the spectrum of war.

Meaning & Reality

When using "every means, old and new, tried and untried, derived from art and derived from other sources", to create meaning in *reality*, there are rules to respect in order to translate the concept of one's realism (Brecht, 1938). Meaning is not solely a standalone product, nor does

it need to be attached to a system. Meaning in terms of photography can only be understood if the concept of realism the photographer has created is understood.

Broomberg & Chanarin's depiction of the war in Afghanistan is meant to be a criticism of the mechanism of the embedding process, as they were not only embedded in the war within the military, but also spent most of the time inside their High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle. Still, they remain documents of what happened in reality. The purpose of the images is detached, almost eradicated, and yet these new methods are a cross between reality and a more personal and artistic vision of it (Glaviano 2014). The method, in this case a bulky photographic paper, is artistic, seen in the spectacular. It is not the intention of classical reportage, or photojournalism to be imposing, as in the case of art, which can, or wants to be imposing, and consequently provoking. The visual differences of the images cannot be understood. These "abstract, non-figurative images are useless as evidenced", they provide no meaning (Broomberg & Chanarin 2008).

What makes them meaningful as documentary work, are not the photographs themselves, rather the recording of the image-making process; the explanatory text at the exhibition; and the discussion with Broomberg & Chanarin. To fully understand their work and intention one cannot look at the images in a magazine or the video online, but rather needed to be at the exhibition. Coincidentally that's the strength and the weakness of the project in regard to meaning.

The meaningfulness in Hetherington's work is less ambiguous, less complex, and less spectacular. The meaning lies within the sphere of empathy and understanding. It angles the war from different perspectives, beyond the news reporting, beyond bombs, gunshots, and atrocity. It represents the ordinary. The point of embarkation is deeper rooted, as to create

meaning, Hetherington has to first build up trust and friendship, he had no Humvee to hide in. Conventional photography in terms of journalism and documentary practice is usually dependent on time; time that slowly evolves. Once it is established, it nevertheless creates authentic meaning and understanding that can be understood in detached formats.

There is usually a 'break-even point' where one can detach the work from the photographer to live semi-independent; this is true for photojournalism, and the work of Hetherington, but not for the work of Broomberg & Chanarin.

Truth & Realism

Reality can be understood as the true world; the world most people experience every day. At least that can be said for the wide masses. Truth and the depiction of realism translated into the real world are strongly linked and often understood as tantamount. If something is seen as reality, it is also the truth. Emotions and feelings on the other hand can blur the perception of reality. They create truth from within, where there might be no reason on the outside. Reasoning has two sides, and the inner one is seducible. Furthermore, the surface does not always reveal itself, and this understanding might be superficial. Sometimes one has to dig deeper.

This is particularly true for the photographic project of Broomberg & Chanarin, as the captured material altogether results in stronger evidence of truth than Hetherington's images do.

The transport of the photographic paper from London to Afghanistan and within the country gives evidence of the photographers being in a war zone. Furthermore, "the journey of the box became, when viewed from the right perspective, an analytical process, revealing the dynamics of the machine in its quotidian details, from the logistics of war to the collusion

between the media and the military” (Broomberg & Chanarin 2008). The video has less of an aesthetic value, but rather is truth-supporting. The project is about the process, so are the reviews of authors, the remarks of editors, they all strengthen the depiction of reality.

The 15-month project of Hetherington in the Korangal Valley depicts another reality. One can argue that the truth is visible here as well, not only due to the time spent, but also due to the photos taken of real soldiers in a real conflict zone. Yet this conventional depiction also wanders beyond the iceberg and touches the emotional aspect, which might blur the perception of truth. The belonging in Hetherington’s photographs facilitate the strong empathy on the one side, but create questioning looks on the other. This togetherness of the photojournalist and the soldiers opens ethical questions about the depicted reality.

The rational layer of realism in Broomberg & Chanarin’s photographs works contrary to the aesthetic content in Hetherington’s by helping the viewer to focus, instead of distracting them with emotions.

Conclusion

One might not agree with the adopted attitude in the project of Broomberg & Chanarin. Odd, superficial, critical, or spectacular. But it can be agreed that it opens space for discussion and challenges gridlocked ideas of the concept of realism, and as Steve Jobs said: “You can [...] glorify or vilify them, but the only thing you can’t do is ignore them because they change things.”

One has to admit that in recent years the same aesthetic conflict photographs have been used in different wars. *The Day Nobody Died* cannot be easily transferred to another war. Still the project relies heavily on its concept and can not live a semi-independent life. Hetherington’s

Sleeping Soldiers, on the other hand, is accessible by the wide masses and extracts itself from the claim to be for the elite. It displays the world as it is understood, and it is seen in the news. The project is open to the people.

Berthold Brecht's quote translated into these two projects wants to explain the concept of realism, and how seemingly obvious realities might look different from other angles. Brecht had a political motivation, so had Hetherington and Broomberg & Chanarin. This is important to keep in mind, to understand their concept of reality.

List of Images

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