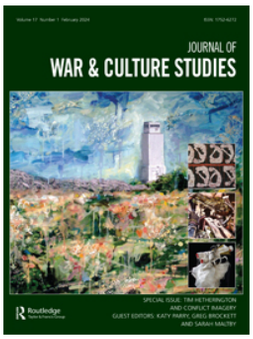

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Restaging Afghanistan: Trapped in the Cycle of Conflict Photographies

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Western, especially British interventions in Afghanistan, parallel the long history of photography. This article examines the resulting archive and considers its ongoing influence on the traditions of conflict photography through the concept of the 'Feedback Loop' coined by photographer Tim Hetherington. Hetherington's work is used as a departure point for an examination of the archival legacy of the male-gendered western gaze in ongoing western incursions. It focusses on Hetherington and contemporary practitioners to position and understand a repetitive cycle of photographic witnessing informed by the archive. Its perspective is on western traditions in the context of picturing Afghanistan and explores what underpins such traditions and how contemporary practitioners are rethinking, rememorizing and now restaging Afghanistan as a site of post-imperial 'conflict'. It argues that what Hetherington identified as a 'feedback loop' is part of a much older tradition of picturing conflict and the combatants at its heart.

KEYWORDS War culture, feedback-loop, staging/restaging, late photography, imperialism, memory, destaging

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> You had this idea that young men in combat act in ways that emulate images they've seen – movies, photographs – of other men in other wars, other battles … You had this idea of a feedback loop between the world of images and the world of men that reinforced and altered itself as one war inevitably replaced another in the long tragic grind of human affairs. That was a fine idea, Tim – one of your very best. (Sebastian Junger, Vanity Fair, April 21st 2011)

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> Images come between the world and human beings. They are supposed to be maps but they turn into screens … Human beings cease to decode the images and instead project them, still encoded, into the world "out there", which meanwhile itself becomes like an image … Human beings forget they created images in order to orientate themselves in the world. Since they are no longer able to decode them, their lives become a function of their own images: Imagination has turned into hallucination. (Flusser 2006, 10)

Introduction

The notion of restaging an event rests on a primary staging or making. We make war, we make pictures, and we make meaning. We also make, remake, and transmit historical and cultural memory. Conflict photographs have ongoingly documented a self-reflexive series of performances, a tragic process that feeds the repetition of memory-based imperial traditions. We see this in the dominant and ongoing focus on elements such as landscape, victors and vanquished, war trophies, portraits of soldiers and aftermath, or so-called late photography.[1] The lexicon of conflict photography is centuries older than the medium itself and in many ways such historical images and their archives stand in the way of comprehension.[2]

As David Campany (2007: 186) noted:

> The photograph can be an aid to memory, but it can also become an obstacle that blocks access to the understanding of the past. It can paralyse the personal and political ability to think beyond the image. Proper knowledge depends not just on the photograph itself but on the place it is afforded in the always fraught project of remembrance.

In the context of work on Holocaust images Cornelia Brink (2000) sought to rethink the small number of archival images that constitute our collective cultural memory of the event, suggesting that they represent a limited set of secular icons that block a deeper understanding (Hariman and Lucaites 2007). Images of liberation from the last few weeks of the war have, she argues, come to stand for the whole and as result, diminish and deflect from the long history of the Holocaust. These images obfuscate and simultaneously embed an 'official' or dominant memory. In this sense meaning becomes fixed, embedded and immutable. For Susan Sontag this moment was a wounding or piercing that left a permanent scar. Sontag (1977/2002: 19) wrote about her first encounter with such iconic images as a 'kind of revelation, the prototypically modern revelation, a negative epiphany'. The emplacement of such images, their construction and signifying strategies inform and overlay subsequent practices and establish the idea of

[1] We can see these representational tropes across the whole span of conflict imagery which pre-dates photography and exemplified in Roger Fenton's coverage of the Crimea in 1855. Examples of these tropes can be seen here: https://www.loc.gov/collections/fenton-crimean-war-photographs/

[2] The debt of photography to art practices exists beyond the appropriation of representational conventions and acts to pre-frame conflict images within discernible cultural understandings of imperialism and racialized 'othering'.

convention. We not only read images in light of their antecedents – images of the concentration camps in Bosnia through the lens of Auschwitz for example – but have historically positioned them to be read in this manner. The consequences of overlapping, lenticular spectatorship detracts from the meaning of individual events and melds cultural understanding, forging powerful and constrained interpretations (Wosińska 2017). Our enculturement speaks directly to the notion of the ongoing replay of emotion and sentiment within a set of authorized and sacrosanct boundaries. We learn to read in a particular way and our culturally and politically framed encounters with images are repetitive and bound up in the identification of repeating patterns and visual tropes (Rancière 2009). In the context of Afghanistan such patterns and their associative behavioural prompts are equally discernible and repetitive.

As 'photographer' Tim Hetherington suggested, conflict and its visual representations are trapped in a perpetual 'feedback loop' – an iterative and amplifying process of the transference of cultural representations into embodied performances by combatants.[3] His mixed practice work in Afghanistan reveals the ongoing contested struggle for domination over this strategic territory that has been documented and redocumented at regular intervals since the pioneering work of photographer John Burke in the late 1870s.[4] At its heart are the performances of young combatants playing out roles invested with meaning that is predetermined by a set of cultural and imperial traditions that frame a discernible 'war culture' in which dominant popular cultural tropes were played and replayed on the frontline for consumption on the home front (Popple 2010).

What Hetherington saw and documented in Afghanistan and other conflict zones were enactments of familiar characterizations of conflict which centre on deeply historical and inter-medial tropes of memory. Vilém Flusser (2006: 90) characterized this effect as the 'collective memory going endlessly round in circles'. Hetherington's struggle was not just to document and confront this destructive cycle but to somehow arrest and break it. In his last interview, recorded with the journalist Rob Haggart in April 2009 Hetherington was explicit about how his practice was a vehicle for his own fascination with violence, his own presence within a cyclical conflict culture mediated between cultural representations and his own attempts at documentation.

> My examination of young men and violence, or of young men and this kind of dramatic energy in war, was also me trying to understand my own fascination with violence. It was as much a journey about my identity as it was about those soldiers. (Hetherington 2009)

[3]Hetherington increasingly declined to self-identify as a photographer. Rather, he preferred to work across still and moving image boundaries to produce documentary projects. Noted as much for his video work as for his photographs he navigated the line between professions to tell stories most effectively.

[4]John Burke (c.1843–1900) was the first western photographer to officially document the Second Anglo-Afghan war between 1878 and 1880. Embedded with the British forces, he was shortly followed by Benjamin Simpson working in Qandahar between 1880 and 1881. The Getty foundation has recently published a catalogue of his images of taken at the end of the second Anglo Afghan war. See: https://www.getty.edu/research/exhibitions_events/exhibitions/qandahar/index.html

He recognized the imperative to understand how not to simply replay historical and archivally embedded tradition, but to attempt to produce work that remixes and remakes new forms of collective memory. Consequently, the camera can be made to function beyond traditions of 'documentation' and repetitive iteration to challenge accreted historical meaning. Photography has the potential to become an agent of anti-imperialism and can be deployed to remake, test, and confront historical traditions of the depiction of conflict and engrained imperial memory. Photography, seen in this context is thus in the service of 'counter memory'. It has increasingly become, in the hands of Hetherington and his contemporaries, a means of contestation and a vehicle for 'speaking back' to the archive of imperial images and recycled picturing conventions (Moore et al. 2017).

In Hetherington's work, Afghanistan provided the latest staging post of these performances and became the focus of a re-examination of tradition (Alphen 2014). It has been a site constructed through traditions of picturing, picturing technologies and practices, ideologies of containment and imperial ambition for nearly two centuries. Its 'representation' driven by a need to present the overwhelming complexities of ongoing incursions as reductive cultural texts which provide justification for ongoing sacrifice and the repeated focus of western and regional powers. It has become a site of witness and of the examination of the active staging of witnessing and memorialization. It has more recently become a site of visual challenge and critical restaging.

Breaking the loop

> When we look at documentary photographs we look at the histories, the politics, the world that gave birth to it. (Linfield 2010: XVII)

As we reflect on yet another in a long series of humiliating and inevitable retreats from Afghanistan in 2021, the cyclical staging (and reflection on the staging) of images prompts us to think about the replay and remix of conflict and images of conflict.[5] It allows, demands even, that we explore what can be learnt from the ongoing moment of conflict photography in the context of Afghanistan. How can we make meaning, as Hetherington sought to do, from observing these processes and how can we affect and break the link with an iterative series of cultural memories and accreted photographic and post-photographic practices?

The answer lies somewhere between the making and interpretation of images and a recalibration of our failure to decode them in the light of their histories.

In her book, the *Cruel Radiance* Susie Linfield sought to provide an answer to the problem of the increasing contestation of conflict images and the crisis of meaning inherent in collective visual witnessing. Mistrust of the documentary photograph and so-called 'concerned photography' was further exacerbated by the digital

[5]The withdrawal of both US and UK forces in August 2021. A subsequent 2022 UK Foreign Affairs committee report entitled *Missing in Action: UK leadership and the withdrawal from Afghanistan*, stated that 'The manner of the withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan was a disaster, a betrayal of our allies, and weakens the trust that helps to keep British people safe' p. 52. https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/22344/documents/165210/default/

turn of the 1990s, necessitating a push back against what she describes as a tendency to 'simply dissemble' images rather than learn from them (Linfield 2010: XV). This rupture was a defining moment, as it sought to frame representational practices and what many saw as an increasingly problematic and liberal elitist genre with Julian Stallabrass (2013: 2) noting that:

> In the twilight of the liberal era, in which documentary served a humanist, ameliorative and reforming role, such photography had come in for harsh critique from those who highlighted its cruelty and bad faith, its concealment of the real causes of oppression, and its masking of dark ideologies under the cloak of a universal love for humanity.

It is certainly natural and deeply human to feel that photographs have impact, can effect change, save lives, that the photographer is some form of saviour. This is certainly something Hetherington and fellow photographers have dared to hope for and have risked, and often given their lives in the pursuit of. In her reading of conflict spaces Linfield exhorts that we read images in a way that allows us to engage in the value of the image as evidence of a variety of meanings and regard it as a site of enlightenment. She is positioning the conflict image as a site of work, somewhere where we take nothing for granted but at the same time don't simply reject what it might have to offer.

She examines a range of representations of conflicted spaces including Afghanistan in which the photographic image has been central to the picturing of conflict and shows how shifting practices have shaped and framed the nature of we have traditionally termed the 'war photograph'. Linfield argues that we should not be defeated by photography and tradition but build on the knowledge it imparts. This is not about the literal truth-to-reality of the image but about cultural repositioning and engagement in new practices which include an examination of the photographic archive. Linfield exhorts us to return to a more accepting and trusting relationship with conflict images. This might seem profoundly at odds with the ontological crises challenging the nature of the photograph in an increasingly post-photographic world but allows us the freedom to think beyond tradition and transcend imperial memory (Ritchin 1990, 2009). Writing about the consequences of the digital turn for conflict photography André Gunthert (2008: 109) argued that it stripped the photograph of its evidentiary status and that its most striking consequence was, 'the disappearance of the photograph's value'.

The mistrust inherent in the type of documentary images that were emerging from conflict zones in the era of concerned practice, coupled with the mistrust of the 'digital' has perhaps given way to a more critical and less conventional mode of address and one in which the role of practice has been integral to critical considerations (Mitchell 1994, Strauss 2014). The rupture with the documentary aesthetic of concerned photography combined with the so-called digital turn allowed for a revaluation and restaging of the conflict image (Azoulay 2001, 2008, Lister 2007); a double whammy of events that ironically freed photography from the very traditions that constrained it. Thus, it is implicit in what Linfield asks that

we need to learn to read around, confront and restage our engagement with the conflict image. One way would be to explore the imperial archive and its resultant cultural influence through practice. By beginning with the earliest photographic stagings we can examine an emergent pattern of representational strategies and understand how they have framed the ways in which we see and understand the specific modes of representation deployed by subsequent generations of conflict photographers.

Hetherington's own work displays many of these strategies, such as his close focus on notions of masculinity and comradeship in *Infidel* (2010) and in his focus on the domain of the war, what James Ryan (1997: 214) characterized as, 'the imaginative geographies of Empire' which enabled the Victorians, 'symbolically to travel through, explore and even possess those spaces'. Hetherington was, unlike many of his antecedents, a self-critical and reflective practitioner, someone attuned to and troubled by his own complicity in the manufacture of conflict images. The landscape, for example has been central to the project of power and ownership and this shot *Villages in the Pesche Valley boarding the Korengal from the perspective of a U-60 Blackhawk helicopter, September 2007*, is characteristic of the projection of dominion and evidence of military superiority (Figure 1). It is completely devoid of human presence, of any conventional signifiers of military hardware, but is deeply surveillant and suggestive of power over an enemy with no air support. Its referent is the position of the camera and not the military hardware itself. Hetherington's picturing of the contested landscape accords effectively with the earliest images from Afghanistan and of the topography of conflict. Shot from a U-60 Blackhawk helicopter it charts both the beauty of the valley and the architecture of ancient villages and vulnerability of those below under the gaze of the US military and the photographer's lens. Such images are part of an ongoing tradition that present the territory of conflict as something to be owned and fixed and have deep imperial roots. They are an adjunct to the military map and a document of naked intent.

Primarily we need to ask where such representational traditions and their locked-in meaning come from – what shaped and fixed them in the popular conscious, and how were Hetherington and many of his contemporaries trying to remake and restage them? What affective turn are we living through and how do we situate our ability, as Linfield demands, to 'understand' photographs? A return to the history of conflict photography in the context of Afghanistan would seem an appropriate point of departure. It was one of the earliest conflicts characterized by a sustained photographic presence, so when we look at images from Afghanistan over the breadth of its photographic representation we see a series of patterns and traditions which transcend time and phases of occupation. We see images that are recognizable and interchangeable with conflicts elsewhere across time and locale. We discern traditions and representational tropes and attempt to read them accordingly. One dominant pattern relates to the repetition of the performance of conflict – one which Hetherington seized on across the various conflicts he covered. Through an examination of the initial staging of

FIGURE 1. Villages in the Pesche Valley boarding the Korengal from the perspective of a U-60 Blackhawk helicopter, September 2007. Tim Hetherington IWM DC 59303.

conflict photographs in the nineteenth century, we can perhaps see the inauguration of the feedback loop and its representational qualities and understand how it became so embedded.

Archival foundations: stagings, tropes and conventions

The twin histories of photography and military intervention in Afghanistan are inextricably linked and have combined to create an extensive and powerful archive. The commercial launch of photography in 1839 and the first British invasion of 1843 are all but synonymous (Saul 2007). Each shadows the other in an ongoing dance around continuity and discontinuity. Each has evolved a rationale for engagement, strategic goals, deployed the latest technologies and sought to impose order and visually embed ownership and permanence. Each has periodically re-defined 'mission' and existential, even ontological form. Neither has succeeded in shaping a territory dubbed 'the graveyard of empires'.[6] Neither has built a legacy beyond the last incursion, the last staging point of the latest imperial ambition or act of containment as in the 'war on terror'.[7] What they resulted in though is a rich assemblage of images that allow us to understand the origin and embedding of the basis of the 'Feedback Loop' (Richards 1993). The structured and structuring power of the archive as the wellspring of the visual performance of conflict and its underpinning imperial mission is powerful and alluring.

[6]The term has a long historical tradition reaching back into antiquity to describe the inability of imperial powers to occupy and rule the territory.

[7]The 'war on terror' describes the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001 to remove Taliban backed al-Qaeda forces responsible for 9/11.

Traditionally the archive is regarded as the point of arrival, the end space of investigation and an archaeological site. It is where we go to look for the past and to assemble evidence of what constitutes deep historical meaning. The sense that it is framed as a site of arrested knowledge needs to be challenged.[8] The archive is better regarded as a point of departure for understanding traditions and conventions of picturing and crucially exists as a countervailing source to work 'with and against'. Much research has centred on exposing the archive and its structuring architectures that have supported imperialism and cultural representations. However, increasingly archival encounters have sought to explore practices which go against the grain to promote new traditions in the collaborative co-option of archival sources to remake and retell imperial stories. Roshini Kempadoo for example has effectively demonstrated the potential for re-interpreting primary archival sources to explore Caribbean identities through the restaging of images (Kempadoo 2016).[9]

Primary archival stagings such as those produced by John Burke are what constitute the imperial archive of Afghanistan and we can use the archive to understand the nature of memory that has been formed there and upon which traditions, culture and nostalgias have been forged. The archive is not a place for simple retrospection or reverie. It is, in this context, not just a site of witness, of evidence but also of ongoing contestation and counter–memory. We must learn to speak through and speak back to the archive. There is a dialogue to engage with that passes in a continual flow of time and memory. As David Bate (2010: 13) suggested:

> With photographs, memory is both fixed and fluid: social and personal. There is nothing neutral here. As sites of memory, photographic images (whether digital or analogue) offer not a view on history but, as mnemonic devices, are perceptual phenomena upon which a historical representation may be constructed.

Consequently, historical representations can also be reconstructed and reformed as a form of counterfactual engagement. Using the archive as a mode of address and a point of departure has a powerful ability to engage and confront audiences with uncomfortable histories and to construct new challenging representations (Simone 2009). The work of artist Shimon Attie and his 1991–92 project *The Writing on the Wall* is indicative of the potential of working creatively with and against the archive to explore the creation of new memory that is not trapped in a historical loop. Attie used archival images of the deported previous occupants of Berlin districts.[10] These were people effaced by the Nazis whose images were projected onto their former homes and rephotographed. By resituating these people into their former contexts Attie confronted the current occupants with the guilt

[8]The term Archive, derived from the Greek Archaeon, denotes a building or repository built to store and arrest knowledge.
[9]To see examples of Kempadoo's re-staging practices see: https://roshinikempadoo.com/
[10]See: https://shimonattie.net/portfolio/the-writing-on-the-wall/

of the past, and their possession of confiscated properties. He surfaced painful truths and established a new dialogue that rescued those in the photographs from victims in an archival repository to a presence in the here-and-now using, 'contemporary media to reanimate sites with images of their own lost histories' (Attie 2003: 75).

The foundational texts of Afghanistan as photographic project predate the first official images produced by John Burke and are situated in the first conflict photographs made two decades earlier by Roger Fenton. Fenton's images from the Crimea in 1855 are *prima facie* evidence of the inauguration of entrenched and encyclical photographic conflict images which are in turn part of a longer imperial project drawing on compositional and genre traditions of the previous two centuries of art practices (Bourke 2017). Fenton's images were intended as a corollary to the critical campaign waged by Florence Nightingale against the failure of the British government's provision of medical care for troops in the field (De Laat 2020). They were made at the behest of Prince Albert to provide calming propaganda for domestic consumption and provide visual evidence of a war well prosecuted (Stein 2018). In many respects they stand as the first blueprint of how to make conflict photographs. They are painterly both in subject and framing and exhibit all the hallmarks of generic conventions drawn from portraiture, history painting and landscape. They exude the bonhomie between comrades whilst maintaining class distinctions, show preparations for war, and war in the aftermath, military hardware, and presence in space (Toler 2012). The most iconic of all Fenton's images *The Valley of the Shadow of Death* (1855), and perhaps the best known (post) conflict image, runs like a thread through the ongoing history of conflict photography.

This image, staged to represent an unrepresentable military engagement, has been referenced and itself restaged over the intervening time since its creation.[11] It has become a touchstone of the repeatability and transmutability of iconic images that can not only cross time but also sites of conflict. It has become a symbol of heroism (and defeat in a very British manner) and was effectively remobilized by Paul Seawright as part of the *Hidden* (2002) series[12].

Seawright, commissioned by the Imperial War Museum to produce images of the conflict in Afghanistan, responded by making non-combat images in the aftermath, akin to many of Fenton's own images which were described as, 'abstract, inhuman and incomprehensible as the wars that caused them'(James 2013: 115). The mundane and abandoned nature of much of the work was characterized by his re-made version of the *Valley of the Shadow of Death* depicting a group of spent shells in a ravine mirroring the appearance and composition of Fenton's famous image. The effect of the image was as Geoff Dyer (2008) wrote, to position Fenton and the deep archive within the contemporary frame of Afghanistan.

[11]The image was a photograph of spent cannon balls in the aftermath of the famous Charge of Light Brigade. It was carefully framed, and two versions were made- one without the cannon balls on the road leading to suggestions it was carefully choreographed. Fenton was unable to photograph action due to the limitations of his equipment let alone the danger he would have put himself in. See: https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/104GXR

[12]See: https://www.paulseawright.com/hidden

> In 2002, in Afghanistan, Paul Seawright came across shell casings lying in a shallow ravine. The resulting photograph is not just reminiscent of Fenton's earlier image, nor is it just a visual essay on an earlier phase of photographic history. Rather, it exhumes Fenton from the past and makes him contemporary.

The comparisons that such a juxtaposition invites are obvious; that war is a form of replay and that its representation is framed by the archive. It is not too far a stretch to also conclude that the conduct of war is similarly bound.

The traditions exemplified by Fenton's foundational archive are illuminating and reveal an ongoing fascination with the traditions of representation. By examining the following two images we can see how they intersect with each other and the legacies they represent in ongoing generations of conflict photographers. We can follow their transference over time and observe variations of the imperial scopic regime. The first image, *The Kabul Gate in the city wall of Jellalabad* (1879) depicts a group of Afghans shot against the ancient ruins of a gateway which frames them in the landscape (Figure 2). It is typical of many images from the period that act both to provide a sense of scale and context and identify the local population. They seem to be turning to move through the open gateway surrounded by crumbling walls. They are the quintessence of antiquity for the western gaze and the picturesque tradition that the image inhabits is part of a mapping, acquisitive lexicon familiar to the contemporary audience. This seems far removed from the business of conflict, a pre-Fall arcadia rather than a body strewn battlefield. It is an image that feeds a possessive and paternalistic sensibility, and was part of a mass trade in images, including the popular immersive stereocard, that fostered a sense of superiority and fed a fascination with the exotic. This is both reassuring and tinged with threat for an audience brought up on the burden of empire, presenting inhabitants, 'as primitive, bizarre, barbaric or simply picturesque' (Price 2021: 114).

Such photographs embedded a particular way of seeing, an imperial gaze that positioned the camera as the interface between two visually and culturally othered territories, a representational trope as alive today as it was in the 1870s.

The second image, *The British Army camp at Fort Jamrud, Afghanistan*. 1879, positions the imperial presence as part of this landscape, replacing the local peoples and other indigenous cultural signifiers with the physical intervention of the architectures of the British Army (Figure 3). The construction of camps, fortifications and military hardware such as cannon and ammunition stocks (constant signifiers in these images) foreground and frame the sense of occupation, building a palimpsestic geography echoed in Donovan Wylie's later images of occupation.

The archive now sits at the intersection between picturing traditions and restaging practices, and photographers and artists have increasingly sought to mobilize it against what it has historically represented. It is not simply there to be critiqued, contested, and historicized – but also to act as a call to action and a creative source of new histories, traditions, and understandings (Emerling 2011). It is something to

be projected into the future from the past. It is not anterior (Popple 2023). As Jacques Derrida (1998: 36) argued, the archive is not about marshalling the past, but knowing the future.

Restaging and new archival traditions

As a consequence of recognizing and naming the process through which images and conflict performances are replayed and feed Hetherington's notion of the loop, we need to envisage an approach which disrupts and breaks the ongoing cycle Hetherington recognized he was complicit in. The stagings and the archives which underpin them are, as Alan Sekula (1986/2003: 446) noted, 'not neutral: they embody the power inherent in accumulation, collection, and hoarding'. By engaging in practices which explicitly acknowledge this to draw on and remake tradition, the nature of conflict photography might be itself restaged in surprising and experimental ways that counter and efface the performative nature of conflict imagery and the orchestration of 'power'. The role of the photograph as a form of fixed historical document is increasingly challenged, as Tanya Barson (2006: 22) notes and is part of a newer tradition of practices that;

> Undermine the status of the document, including those featuring (false) archives or restage history, reflect the increasing distrust of fixed concepts of 'fact' and 'history'.

These are disruptive practices that break the imperial index and can create new forms of trace with the potential to dislodge practice traditions and narrative orthodoxies.[13]

Photographers have increasingly engaged with and remade the archive as a mode of resistance and political intervention. Strategies have included a range of restaging practices that are increasingly characterized by forms of rephotography, intertextuality and dialogic provocations.

The first major, and archivally dialogic work focussing on Afghanistan was made by the photographer Jeff Wall in 1992. The 'photograph', an intricately and digitally constructed assemblage was titled *Dead Troops Talk (A Vision After an Ambush of a Red Army Patrol near Mogor, Afghanistan, Winter 1986)*.[14] It represented the afterlife of dead Soviet troops after an ambush during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (1979–89). It is an imaged restaging of the aftermath of the event that presents the mutilated troops as if they were part of an eighteenth-century conversation piece – arranged in groups carousing, gambling, joking and tormenting each other. All that is missing is the lapdog and retinue of servants that attend such scenes.

[13]This can be seen for example in Thomas Dworzak's (2003) book of found images of Taliban fighters which shows vernacular studio traditions wholly at odds with the othering images of 'enemy' that populate the archive (Verschueren 2012, Chao 2019). Similarly, the depiction of Afghan women as othered or as victims is equally prevalent and mobilized in core news narratives (Berry 2003, Fluri 2009).

[14]See: https://www.thebroad.org/art/jeff-wall/dead-troops-talk-vision-after-ambush-red-army-patrol-near-moqor-afghanistan-winter

FIGURE 2. The Kabul Gate in the city wall of Jellalabad. Attributed to John Burke, 1879. IWM Q 69852.

FIGURE 3. The British Army camp at Fort Jamrud, Afghanistan. 1879 British Army official photographer IWM Q 69819.

It is a deliberative conflation of art history, genre painting, Goya's etchings of *The Disasters of War* (1810-1820) and the latest digital editing technologies. The image was created in the studio in the mode of a film and composited from individually

shot elements akin to nineteenth-century art photography as practised by Henry Peach Robinson and O.J. Rejlander[15] – contemporaries of Fenton. As a piece of imagined reality, with a visceral authenticity in the depiction of wounds and the consequences of extreme violence, it is in Sontag's (2003: 123) description, 'the antithesis of a document'. The image is disruptive and defies a literal reading. It simultaneously presents familiar tropes and signifiers and complicates the processes of signification precisely because of the repetitious construction or restaging of a library of archival components.[16] It is openly transgressive in its initial appearance as a familiar war scene that falls apart as we begin the read the post-mortem exchanges occurring between the dead troops. Its intertextual richness and knowing complicity in artifice versus hyper-realism gives a nod to what was to follow in the evolving re-negotiations of 'Afghanistan as image' and ensuing patterns of representation.

The use of recognizable signifiers and historic motifs of occupation are still a constant in more contemporary renderings of Afghanistan – but they speak in a different way. They are re-photographed in the light of tradition and expose that tradition to scrutiny. The work of Richard Ash (the then staff photographer at the Imperial War Museum) and part of the *War Story* Project,[17] revisits these visual elements as a point of contrast with tradition – as a 'memorialisation of memorialisation' (Figure 4). The emblematic western signifiers, in the forms of headstones and crucifixes in a non-Christian culture, are a potentially provocative form of a very visible cultural imposition that is cyclical and ongoing. The use of signifiers of western presence in Ash's work – Union Jacks, St. George's cross, Darth Vader's helmet, crucifixes, altars, gravestones, and memorials – are constant reminders of what is at stake and of the evidence of occupation. The historic headstones in some of the images are stonily permanent – such as in the images of the British graveyard at Kabul – or otherwise makeshift, temporary, and contingent. The row of crucifixes at Camp Bastion lacks a human presence but symbolizes the implanted alien religion of the occupiers and the focus of memorialization and grieving for the fallen. Unlike the established presence of the Victorian graveyards these are ready to be removed and transplanted to the next theatre of operations. The series also features many images of makeshift and pop-up altars. They are mobile and disposable and speak to a shifting post-imperial world in which war and occupation, and the religious symbolism which underpins it, is constantly restaged, re-sited and revisited.

Donovan Wylie's series of conflict-focussed projects leading up to the Afghan-based 2011 project *Outposts* perfectly exemplify the ongoing loop of repetitive practices through the reuse and restaging of institutional and military constructions

[15]Both photographers used a combination of individual photographs and preliminary sketches to produce complex composite images – an analogue pre-cursor to the digital stitching that produced Walls' image.

[16]Richard Barnes' series of modern daguerreotypes of US Civil War re-enactments remake familiar archival images using authentic technologies. Barnes playfully captures the authenticity of known images produced in the 1860s by the likes of Brady and Gardiner and infused them with contemporary, disruptive signifiers such as loudspeakers, portable toilets, pylons, and spectators. See: http://www.richardbarnes.net/projects#/civil-war-1/

[17]See: https://www.iwm.org.uk/sites/default/files/press-release/War%20Story%20Afghanistan%202014_.pdf

and the same types of presentism represented by Ash. Wylie's focus on the presence of the architectures of imperialism began with two projects focussing on the British occupation of Northern Ireland, the euphemistically termed period of the Troubles (1969–98). The *Maze* (2004)[18] and *British Watchtowers* (2007)[19] map the end of British occupational presence following the conclusion of the Belfast agreement in 1998. Both document occupational architectures – the Maze prison that housed members from both communities in the notorious H-Blocks and border watchtowers used to police the border between north and south. These projects are characterised by a focus of form and function and their place within a particular landscape – in the centre of a city and on a winding and hilly boundary. They are both devoid of human presence and have a calm and neutral aesthetic which underlies their functionality and surveillant intent. They appear as structures redolent of the fortifications and encampments that populate much of the imperial archive. John Burke's topographical images and those of Donovan Wylie are similar in scale and composition and again speak to a traditions of picturing that has become embedded over the intervening century and a half.

The *Outpost* (2011)[20] squares the archival circle in that the watchtowers that policed one imperial border are now partially re-constructed on another in Afghanistan. They were dismantled, like the Maze prison and recycled. The transference of these architectures seems only natural as they assume their role in service of the next phase of British foreign policy. They are similarly monumental and again almost devoid of human presence. Unlike their historical antecedents though, we are invited to see the patterns in behaviour and the occupation of familiar territories they represent. Afghanistan, like Ireland having been subject to British Imperialism for centuries.

Wylie's projects are drawn out of his own experience growing up in Northern Ireland and of a British presence that cast a long shadow. The conflict photographer Simon Norfolk was similarly engaged in the experience of both documenting and trying to understand the nature of imperial legacies. His avowed opposition to the war in Afghanistan led him to embark on a collaborative and again dialogic project with the origins of the tradition he worked in. In 2010 Norfolk initiated a series of photographs that responded to John Burke's images made in 1879. Working from Burke's images as a creative spur the photographer worked in Afghanistan to re-shoot and respond to these archival images and to think about the author of these foundational texts around what he called the 'Long War'.[21] Having seen Burke's work at the National Media Museum he, 'immediately saw a cycle of imperial history right there' (Lowe and Norfolk 2011).

The work Norfolk made in response to Burke's images followed the generic forms he had laid down in 1879, and those established by Fenton in 1855. They consist of a series of military portraits, ethnographic and typological scenes and are matched

[18]See: https://www.donovanwylie.studio/index.php?page=work&album=2
[19]See: https://www.donovanwylie.studio/index.php?page=work&album=3
[20]See: https://www.donovanwylie.studio/index.php?page=work&album=4
[21]See: https://www.simonnorfolk.com/burke-norfolk

FIGURE 4. Image of scene at Camp Bastion, the principal British base in Helmand Province, Afghanistan during Operation Herrick XVI (H16) Richard Ash August 12, 2012.

in composition and subjects over a gap of one hundred and twenty years. Norfolk also chose to shoot in sepia to preserve the look of the originals he had carefully studied despite being an exponent of colour in his other work in Afghanistan. Indeed, he ascribes the look of this earlier work as based on eighteenth century romantic painting. Whilst conforming to and replicating the archival look of the originals, the comparative practice reveals continuities and discontinuities through the pairing of images which expose the repetitive nature of the 'Long War' and foreground subtle changes and challenges that simultaneously affirm and confront their histories.

The appropriation of the 'look' of the archive is also a strategy increasingly borne through the affordances of the digital turn and focus on the ability to simulate archival forms and transpose meaning through the use of apps, filters and post-production techniques. The American photo-journalist Damon Winter deployed the iPhone camera and the Hipstamatic app to picture the lives of US troops on a tour of duty in Afghanistan in 2010.[22] His pictures made the front page of *The New York Times* and directly reference older analogue processes through the nostalgic lens of the app (Bull 2012: 24). Such images are uncannily familiar to the American public through the older analogue colour work of war photographers Larry Burroughs and Tim Page in Vietnam whose visual appearance they appropriate as an act of digital simulation. They also stirred up a controversy about the propriety of using digital filters in war reporting and the ethical

[22]See:https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/2010/11/22/world/asia/22grunts.html

status of the images. As one blogger noted in a series of exchanges about Winters' images they were, 'Fine for art, bullshit for journalism' (Very Little Gravitas Indeed 2010). They were challenging, disruptive and provocative simply because they broke photojournalistic conventions and referenced uncomfortable historical images that had become what Brink would have described as secular icons of the Vietnam war. In their vernacular form they also break the distance between photojournalist and professional photographers and the troops on the ground who used the same equipment and apps.

What links these examples is their recognition and reworking of historical memory and a visually imperialist lexicon. All work with and against convention and all have new things to say about how, through practice, we can actively understand images and think through them as Linfield asks. By exploring the processes that inform the staging of conflict in this context, we might perhaps learn more about how to address the so-called feedback loop. Hetherington wanted to learn from observing the process, to understand why the ongoing and cyclical representational tropes that define and dictate behaviours are so compelling, ultimately wanting to break the loop and usurp traditions of imperial memory informed by the archive. To go beyond understanding the power of images and representational strategies means perhaps to go beyond the making and staging of images themselves (Zylinska 2010).

Conclusions: destaging and destabilizing

The digital turn and affordances that increasingly enable approaches such as those taken by Winter have accelerated and opened up the field of practice around conflict photographs and post-photographic images. They have already begun to sever the links and the certainties upon which tradition has been sustained and upon which Hetherington's notion of the 'feedback loop' sit. In another return to Fenton's iconic image the artist Pavel Maria Smejkal incorporated the *Valley of the Shadow of Death* into his 2013 *Fatescapes* project.[23] Smejkal selected a series of similarly iconic conflict images, including work by Robert Capa, Kevin Carter, and Eddie Adams and digitally removed any trace of the signifiers that gave them meaning (Dyer 2011). What remained was the landscape or context of the image disrupting meaning and severing the link to the archive. As Smejkal (Anon 2013) explained:

> I remove the central motifs from historical documentary photograph. I use images that have become our cultural heritage, that constitute memory of nations, serve as symbols or tools of propaganda and exemplify a specific approach to photography.

Of course, our cultural memory and lexicon of this and similar images allows us to re-insert what we know is missing from the frame and evidence our own reliance on them for the understanding of historic conflicts. This reductive experimentation

[23]See: https://www.lensculture.com/projects/80186-fatescapes

and other examples of representing at a remove, away from the site of conflict and in concert with the archive inexorably lead to the possibility of 'breaking' reinforcing traditions and making new and critical works that mark another turn, one that leads to a restaging of convention and a destabilization of conflict cultures.[24]

The digital turn, simulation, and the sweeping onset of generative AI technologies such as Midjourney v5 and DALL.E 3 extend the potential to remake and destage the imperial project and its archival stranglehold without making conflict images in the field. Like the very first conflict images published in the press in the nineteenth century drawn from the collective imaginations of war artists whose sources were at best a collation of time-lagged journalistic accounts and a set of stock representations and imperial prejudices, AI is a form of archival imaginary. It seeks out patterns and constructs new imperial imaginaries. We can remove the photographer from the equation entirely and use the data of the archive and bend it to different purposes. We also sever the certainties attached to the photograph as object that has over nearly two centuries performed the role of carrying information. Our habitual reliance on, and engagement with the photograph represented,' an active rather than passive object' with, 'a meaning specifically navigated through use' (Riches et al. 2012: 26).

AI tools can instead be trained to produce images devoid of human and indexical agency and outside traditional patterns of use. It is now possible to ask for images, like the one above, that show an expression of Hetherington's own concept of the 'Feedback Loop.' We can combine elements from the whole era of photographic representations of Afghanistan. We can ask for versions of images that Hetherington might have shot in the style of Fenton or Burke without ever having seen or appreciated their work (Figure 5). Consequently, this new project is fraught with ethical and representational uncertainties and may simply reinforce the tendencies of the past (Crawford 2021). What is certain is that new opportunities exist, both for photographers, archivists, and digital practitioners to explore these affordances, and forge disruptive and challenging representations of conflict and broaden the field of representation.

A delicate balance will need to be struck between the project of recovering lost archives, making counter archives and creative practices visible, driving inclusivity and 'presence' in representations and the restaging and remaking of extant archives that underpin new generative AI and post photographic practices. We can see AI as a useful tool in the service of reparative and counter factual representations, or as a new form of tyranny that perpetuates the inherent western and gendered biases in its own datasets (Jaillant and Rees 2023).[25] New emergent restaging and destaging practices offer different pathways to thinking about how we might engage with

[24]For example, photographer Melanie Friend's project *The Home Front* (2013) relocates the representation of conflict to the home front with a focus on military displays, arms fairs and re-enactments. See: https://melaniefriend.com/the-home-front

[25]Figure 5 illustrates to racialized bias of the underpinning archive, lacking diversity, and privileging white western male figures. It also speaks dramatically to the non-representation of vernacular photographic tradition and female subjects. It denies a growing body of work concerned with the non-male gaze exemplified by artists such as Farzana Wahidy and Lynsey Addario (Edwards 2010, 2013).

FIGURE 5. DALLE.3 generated image created by the author. The DALLE.3 prompt generated this accompanying caption: Archival photo of US troops in Afghanistan taking a break. A soldier reads a comic adaptation of 'Rambo', while others around him discuss the fictional hero's tactics and compare them to their real-life experiences, showcasing the feedback loop between fictional media portrayal and on-ground discussions. DALLE.3. 16 October 2023.

Hetherington's conceptualization of the 'Feedback Loop' and how we can problematize it as part of a centuries-old set of embedded cultural practices. The next few years will provide evidence for the value, or otherwise, of increased experimentation and the potential for a new ontological crisis that mirrors the crisis inherent in the imperial project.

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