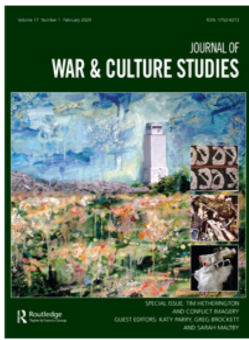

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Examining the Tim Hetherington Collection Through Visually-Led Public Engagement Workshops

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War photography scholarship tends to focus attention on photographers' lives and the thematic content of images. This study shifts the spotlight onto how varied members of the public respond to a body of work, in this case the photography and filmmaking of Tim Hetherington (1970-2011), whose archive the Imperial War Museum (IWM) obtained in 2017. We discuss findings from a number of visually-led focus groups with refugees, veterans, military family members, photography students and museum volunteers. Together we examined his image-making process with the groups to discover how they discussed notions such as intimacy, masculinity, the 'good' conflict photograph, and ethical dilemmas. We argue that engaging with multiple public perspectives through visual elicitation methods enhances curatorial knowledge and understanding of image-making practices in this specific context, whilst also offeringt insights for national museums more broadly on how dialogue with diverse communities can enrich the handling and display of new collections.

KEYWORDS conflict photography, museum practice, Tim Hetherington, visual elicitation, focus groups, public engagement, audience research

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Introduction

Tim Hetherington was a British photographer and film-maker who was killed by mortar fire in Libya in 2011. When the United Kingdom's national war museum, the Imperial War Museum (IWM), obtained the Tim Hetherington archive in 2017, the museum was keen to engage with researchers and interested members of the public to enhance understanding of Hetherington's legacy as someone who documented people's experiences of war through photography and film-making.[1] Our Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded (AHRC) initiative, 'The Tim Hetherington and Conflict Imagery Network' was designed with public engagement activities at its heart. Working together as an independent scholar, IWM curator responsible for the collection, and doctoral student funded to examine the Tim Hetherington archive, we were keen to integrate multiple voices into our understanding of Hetherington's body of work, especially from those who had 'lived experience' of conflict – as refugees, veterans, and military family members. In this article, we discuss our findings from a number of visually-led focus groups, arguing for a multiperspectival approach that enriches our understanding of how Hetherington's filmmaking and photography practices are meaningful for different people. This therefore combines the museum's objectives of public engagement with our research interests in how visual media texts are individually and collectively interrogated and interpreted by diverse groups of people in a social setting (Lunt and Livingstone 1996).

One contention at the heart of photojournalism, and especially conflict photography, is the power of images to reveal the human stories of those pictured, to make an emotional connection between photographic subject and viewer. But actual research with audiences and publics tends to be neglected in photography or visual culture scholarship. Instead, the audience's investment with, or attention to, photography has been largely theorized rather than tested (Moeller 1999, Sontag 2003). The balance has started to shift, with audience studies complicating the sometimes common-sensical notions surrounding compassion, pity and empathy (Höijer 2004, Kyriakidou 2015). In the 'semi-sacred space' of the war museum (Winter 2012), photographs offer visual traces of past wars, selected according to judgements on their aesthetic and sombre qualities, and the potential to engage the curiosity of visitors.

In this article, we situate our study first within the context of museum studies and how the participatory role of the visitor, community, or audience has become a key concern. Despite a discursive shift to dialogue and collaboration, the majority of this work takes place in community or local museums, rather than national museums, and only once exhibitions are open for visitors. We suggest that our research is unusual in giving public access to a collection *before* it is made publicly accessible and exhibited in the museum, to garner perspectives that can feed into the

[1]IWM's remit has been expressed differently over the years since its founding in 1917 during the First World War, with the current 'About Us' page reading: 'We collect objects and stories that give an insight into people's experiences of war, preserve them for future generations, and bring them to today's audiences in the most powerful way possible.' (https://www.iwm.org.uk/about).

interpretation of the archive, and move beyond the expert-authorial position usually adopted by the curator and exhibition staff. Our study also foregrounds the use of photographs and other visual prompts in the focus group context, agreeing with Douglas Harper (2002: 23) that this approach offers a pleasurable and fruitful research experience, where facilitators and participants 'figure out something together' by drawing upon individual reflections, collective exchanges and emotionally inflected responses. We contend that this kind of dialogue is something that could enrich expert understanding and encourage openness to diverse perspectives on how artefacts communicate, especially in the morally contentious subjects of war and photography depicting war experiences.

Specifically, we ask: How do participants engage with Hetherington's images and writing, and how do they interpret his particular approach to war photography? How are the participants' interpretations expressed through activities and dialogue? In what ways can public engagement with new collections enrich understanding and shape interpretation of the archive? In addressing such questions, we show how filmmaking and photography practices are meaningful for different people in a variety of ways.

Literature review

Tim Hetherington and conflict imagery research

Conflict photography and photojournalism have long fascinated scholars, from the early war photographs of Roger Fenton (Sontag 2003, Morris 2011) to the era of the archetypal photo-reportage from the Spanish Civil War, Second World War, Vietnam War and beyond (Griffin 1999, Oldfield 2019). As Allbeson and Oldfield (2016: 96) argue, conventional histories of war photography tend to link two narratives: the first of the pioneering and courageous (male) photographers 'creating aesthetically striking icons of conflict'; and secondly, the role of technological developments which have enabled documentation of conflict. A recent examination of the construction of the 'Capa myth' (referring to photographer Robert Capa), by Assaf and Bock (2022) showed how the characteristics associated with hegemonic masculinity (risk-taking, strength and courage) were emphasized over Capa's humanity, with his own writing contributing to the mythical heroic figure of the 'Greatest War Photographer'. Other esteemed scholarship focuses on the 'iconic' or emblematic content, and the discursive context of their reproduction in magazines, newspapers, photobooks and exhibitions (Griffin 1999, Hariman and Lucaites 2007). On the surface, Tim Hetherington fits the model of the courageous, handsome, white Western male war photographer, who won international acclaim for his photojournalism, documentaries, books and installation artwork. His death in a mortar attack in Misrata on 20 April 2011 during the Libyan civil war, aged only 40, also fits the narrative of dying far too young (Huffman 2013). This is a classic archetype that Hetherington was more than aware of, and which he critiqued during his career (Hetherington 2010a).

Given that Hetherington won the World Press Photo of the Year (WPP) award in 2008 for his photograph of an exhausted soldier, Brandon Olson of the US 503rd Infantry Regiment, 173rd Airborne Brigade, and was nominated for an Academy Award for the documentary film *Restrepo* (2010) with Sebastian Junger, it is perhaps not surprising that this work with US soldiers in the Korengal Valley of Afghanistan has attracted the majority of the scholarly attention and media commentary (Campbell 2009, Danchev 2011, Kennedy 2015, Burgoyne and Rositzka 2016, Burgoyne 2017, Bjerre 2017). Burgoyne and Rositzka (2016, n.p.) make the point that *Restrepo* (Hetherington and Junger 2010) and *Infidel* (Hetherington 2010b) are particularly valuable 'for the new questions they ask about the iconography of violence, vulnerability, and the embodied politics of war photography and film', especially in the era of virtual war and 'war at a distance'. As Burgoyne (2017: 58) also argues elsewhere, Hetherington and Junger's work emphasizes somatic experience and the body of the soldier as a 'critical site of representation and meaning', standing against the notion of 'disappearing war' in the digital media landscape. However, Hetherington stressed that photography was not so much a goal in itself, but a way to gain the freedom to report on the prosecution of wars and to *communicate* with different audiences through a variety of visual imaging technologies and dissemination routes. Hetherington appeared to agonize over the limitations of photography and how to 'build bridges' with audiences, and for his work to be useful beyond its artistic merits (Kennedy 2015). His own efforts to engage with audiences make his archive a suitable one for exploring how public responses can help inform museum practice.

Photographers, filmmakers and educators have written of how Hetherington inspired them with his poetic approach and his commitment to long-term narrative projects (Houghton 2018, Stuart Hughes 2018). The Tim Hetherington Trust now works to promote Hetherington's vision, and the Trust were not only responsible for donating the archive to IWM, but also have an annual Visionary Award in his name, designed to foster innovative and experimental approaches to visual storytelling. As Alan Huffman (2013: 244) bluntly concludes in his biography: 'Tim was an artist and a humanitarian, but in the end, war defined him, and killed him'. We cannot do full justice to Hetherington's critical imagination and varied body of work here, but this short summary hopefully introduces some of the difficult and contradictory themes that drove him before his untimely death. We now turn to the museum context which shapes our research with members of the public.

Museums and their publics

Susan Ashley (2014: 261) writes that public engagement has become a 'central theme in the mission statements and strategic objectives of many cultural institutions, and in scholarly research into museums and heritage'. Such inclusionary goals were part of a wider shift in policy from the 1990s onwards across Western societies, with cultural institutions pressed to broaden their engagement with diverse communities and to confront their traditional hierarchies of knowledge

and authority (Ashley 2014). For Ashley, the different uses of the word 'engagement' have been underexamined, and related notions of 'democratization' have elided the continued power differentials in museum practice and the sometimes irreconcilable political conflicts or controversies associated with their collections. Meaningful public dialogue or collaboration at the planning stages of exhibitions appears to be rare for national museums, if not for local or community museums (Lynch 2011).

With increasing calls for museums to repatriate cultural objects, this is another area of decision-making where proactive engagement and consultation with communities of origin and 'stakeholders' is encouraged, with the Arts Council recently updating its guidance for English museums in August 2022 (Arts Council 2022). A number of recent initiatives such as 'Living Cultures' at the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, or Manchester Museum's repatriation of items from its Aboriginal collection to Australia, have been transformative for museum staff, not only correcting their knowledge on the origin and cultural significance of artefacts, but in putting 'radical hope' and notions of care at the heart of their curatorial practice (Kendall Adams 2020). In the area of public engagement and learning, the Museums Association (2020) has produced a manifesto for museum learning and engagement, outlining how participation in culture is a basic human right and envisaging museums as effective centres for social justice and transformation. Outside the UK, even more transformative practices of 'participatory curatorship', for example at the Uganda Museum, are offering opportunities to completely reimagine the space and work of the museum, encouraging dialogue about heritage and justice as part of a peacebuilding process (Nelson Adebo *et al.* 2022).

Our study was relatively exploratory and cannot claim to be part of a grand museum initiative. We held the workshops as part of an AHRC-funded research network project, and not as part of the museum's official public engagement and learning programme. While modest in scope, this gave us the freedom to examine Hetherington's legacy and the difficult ethical questions raised in such work. Before outlining the research design for our study, we finally consider the specific role of photography in museums.

Photography in museums

The Imperial War Museum London has hosted several 'blockbuster' exhibitions focused on photographers, including Don McCulllin (2011–2012), Lee Miller (2015–2016), and, at the Imperial War Museum North, Magnum's co-founder George Rodger (2008). Ideas of cultural significance and value are reinforced through the vast amount of time and effort that goes into organizing such exhibitions, bestowing authority onto the featured photographers, and photography itself – or even the genre of photojournalism - as worthy museum entities (Edwards and Morton 2015).

More routinely, the IWM's vast collection of photographs are integrated into exhibitions, alongside other artefacts (such as clothing, cameras, diaries, letters, weaponry, vehicles), audio of oral testimony, film, artwork, and more recently

immersive virtual reality displays. Whether viewed as informational evidence or artwork, photographic images are vital resources in many archives, and their omnipresence in today's cultural institutions, aided by digitalization (thus creating even more digital photographs of all sorts of objects, posted on websites to promote their collections), can become a taken-for-granted yet underexplored aspect of museum practice (Edwards and Ravilious 2022).

In their recent edited collection on what photographs 'do' in museums, Elizabeth Edwards and Ella Ravilious (2022: 5) write that the recent critical literature on museums has tended to overlook 'photographs and the formative cultures of photographs in museums'. In setting out the 'work' of photographs in museums (and in their case specifically the Victoria & Albert Museum), the editors show how photographs not only achieve status as objects in collections, but also 'frame how things are ordered, how catalogues work, how objects are known, how digital interfaces operate and how exhibitions feel and function as a rhetoric of value' (11). This highlights the multiplicity in the uses of photographs in the institutional context of the museum. There is clearly a tension between the didactic, educational tradition of the museum setting, with its ordering and fixing of meaning, and the symbolic, affective and open qualities of photography. We embrace what Edwards (2001) has earlier referred to as the 'uncontainability' of photographs, their suggestive, symbolic, ambiguous and polysemic potential. It is not our intention to delve too far into the ontological complexities of photography, but we are interested in how, in the specific context of our public workshops, different meanings are negotiated through social interactions, which in turn generate personal storytelling and affectively attuned reflections.

Methods

Our data is drawn from a series of combined public engagement workshops conducted between 2019-2022. Our first two workshops took place on 1 March 2019, designed as a pilot study and funded by the University of Leeds IGNITE internal funding. We used the IWM's membership list to recruit participants, separating the groups into military community (serving personnel, veterans, family members) and non-military. We then received funding from the AHRC for the research networking project in 2020, but due to the COVID pandemic we were not able to hold our next workshops until 6–7 July 2021. For this set of workshops we recruited refugees through the Manchester Refugee Support Network (MRSN), who provided safeguarding expertise and access to therapy for anyone who requested it following our group discussions. Finally we held two workshops on 5 November 2021, recruiting a mix of military community, photography students and museum volunteers via the IWM membership list and local university contacts. In total, we spoke with 60 participants across the 6 groups.[2] Following the principle

[2]Both the IGNITE and AHRC projects received ethical approval through the University of Leeds, and written consent was obtained from all participants (Ethics Approval Ref. LTCOMM-042 (2019) and FAHC 20–012 (2020)). We have anonymised all participant quotations.

of minimizing personal data collection, and because we do not make claims for representativeness in terms of demographics, we did not routinely collect information on ethnicity, gender or other attributes, but our refugee group members often mentioned the country they had been forced to leave in our general introductions, listing countries as diverse as Azerbaijan, Cameroon, Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Somalia, Sudan and Syria.

Aligned with our research interest in visual images as not only representing the world around us, but also in shaping our own identities and socio-cultural relationships, we embedded visual approaches within our qualitative research design. The workshops followed a focus group design familiar to cultural studies and critical communication scholars, with an interest in how interpretations and interrogations of texts 'are collectively constructed through social interaction' (Lunt and Livingstone 1996: 88). We also employed visual methods such as photo elicitation and picture sorting to encourage discussion and prompt reflections in response to the varied materials in the collection.

Visual or photo elicitation methods use visual materials to stimulate responses which are more detailed and tap into emotions in ways which would be difficult without such prompts (Harper 2002, Ferrari 2022). We are following what Harper classes as a culture-driven or 'cultural studies' approach, focused on how the interviewees interpret cultural items and generate reflections on related issues. In this case: how a body of work by a photojournalist and film-maker addresses concerns, such as the media industry's treatment of photographic 'subjects' in circumstances of conflict. As Brown and Reavey (2021) write, in such an approach, the images themselves are not the focus for later analysis, but rather the interactive discussions elicited by the visual materials. The transcripts from the workshops were analysed thematically to determine recurrent topics and concerns, and the ways in which participants identified with Hetherington's work. As stated earlier, our guiding research questions are: How do participants engage with Hetherington's images and writing, and how do they interpret his particular approach to war photography? How are their interpretations expressed through activities and dialogue between participants? In what ways can public engagement with new collections enrich understanding and shape interpretation of the archive?

We followed a protocol that contained questions on a mix of materials and themes: the process of making a 'good' conflict image and its re-use in a media context; masculinity and intimacy in soldier imagery; ethical image-making; the storytelling power of war images. We gave content warnings and kept in mind the cultural sensitivity of the artefacts and questions, especially with our refugee groups, which consisted of people from a vast range of countries and who had escaped from traumatic and deadly situations. Unlike our other groups, these were also people who told us they were unlikely to visit the IWM, even though they lived close to the IWM North. We feel that it is important to garner the views of those affected by war but who are less likely to visit the museum, as this extends our study beyond the kind of audience testing or visitor surveys conducted by the museum. In the findings, we focus on responses to three visually-led

activities: Hetherington's World Press Photo winning photograph and the context of its production and media presentation; a picture-sorting exercise using Hetherington's images from the Libyan civil war in 2011; and an extract from his diary during the same conflict. Many of the items in the Tim Hetherington collection are now accessible digitally via the IWM website (https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/tim-hetherington).

Findings

The different activities given to the participants not only demonstrated how they engaged with the work of Hetherington, but also supported Edwards' notion of 'uncontainability' (2011) in the polysemic potential of the visual materials. Although we had a set of themes in mind, we were also interested to see how the 'socially situated' nature of the groups allowed people to relate the activities to their own experiences and identities (Lunt and Livingstone 1996). Participants gave a variety of reasons for attending the workshops, some of which were emotional or creative, while others related to life experiences. Not all participants had necessarily heard of Hetherington, but there were exceptions to this, especially the photojournalism or photography students. For some, it was Tim Hetherington's name that prompted them to come along:

> Because when I saw my e-mail come through and I saw his face again […] I was just like, 'I have to be here,' because he wasn't just a photographer in the sense […] What he captures is like his soul is in the photographs. So it was more an emotive thing for me.

> And I first came across Tim's work in the book 'Infidel', and I just got blown away by him. The photographs were just so different, and it's been said before, they are an intimate portrayal and there is something about them.

We learned not just about our participants' connections to Hetherington, but other parts of their lives, for example their military experience or that of loved ones and how conflict photography helped them to better understand it.

> I wanted to learn more about what textbooks couldn't teach me so, as part of the reserves, I deployed last year on a peacekeeping tour to Cyprus. [..] My partner, he served in Afghanistan but doesn't really talk about it to me. I'm sure he probably does to other people who have had the same experiences as him but that leaves me out of the bubble so I'm always really interested in anything which will further my understanding of his experiences.

Those with experience of conflict offered us both matter-of-fact and emotionally charged reflections on the role of photographers in such dangerous situations. This is a theme will we return to below, with notions of proximity to war and the limitations of how this can be conveyed to global audiences a recurring and complex topic. One refugee participant recounted how he had met a BBC photographer in Sierra Leone, just before he was shot dead:

> The BBC photographer had been standing with me in one place, and the rebels and the other sides were starting just fighting out in the city of Sierra Leone. That's in Freetown. So he told us that he should go and take pictures [...] So finally after 30 min, he was shot dead. So this is how in a war zone it's happening.

Many brought extensive experience of photographic practice, either in the armed forces, as photojournalists, and as students. As Allbeson and Oldfield (2016) have noted, there is a scholarly interest in the changing technologies used in conflict imagery and we found that this is also a preoccupation of some in our groups. We observed how the technologies and techniques employed by Hetherington were significant to how they engaged with his work. And we certainly weren't the only ones asking questions:

> How do you load film when you're being shot at?

> Do we know why he chose to shoot in colour?

> Did he develop his film on the field or did he wait to be back home?

Participants were keen to learn about Hetherington's practice and asked many questions about the use of different cameras and media technologies. Such curious questioning can help to guide the museum on how the collection is presented, for example in the accompanying exhibition text or in online content. But we were also struck by the imaginative and affectively-driven connections to Hetherington through his work, especially considering he had been dead for ten years. Expressions of gratitude, empathy, respect, and frustration indicated to us that the 'uncontainability' (Edwards 2001) of the photographs' meanings also extended to varied and unprompted feelings. We now focus on three of our visually-led activities, and how participant discussions provided nuanced understandings of the (a)politicality of Hetherington's approach and notions of an ongoing dialogue between the ever-shifting subjectivities of the photographer, subject and audience.

How a 'poor' but prize-winning image conveys intimacy, honesty and vulnerability: 'the exhausted soldier'

One key image we used was Hetherington's WPP winning photograph mentioned earlier, depicting a soldier with his hand over his face in apparent exhaustion after patrolling in the Korengal Valley, Afghanistan. Participants were additionally shown the photograph within the context of a press article, and a slide show of the RAW photographs Hetherington had taken with his digital camera that day. The photographs followed Second Platoon, 173rd Airborne Brigade, preparing to go on patrol, and their return to base. One of the final images was the original RAW digital photograph of the exhausted soldier. The presentation allowed the participants to see the group of images from that day in order, and to see the WPP winning image before its light had been adjusted to make the darkened scene discernible. This encouraged speculation on why Hetherington selected the image

and submitted it to the competition. As others have observed, in technical terms the photo is 'blurred and out of focus' (Bjerre 2017: 155), but it captured a gloomier side to the bonding of a group of American young men 'on the side of a mountain' (Hetherington, cited in Kennedy 2015: 166). Comments from our groups echoed observations from photography scholars, referring to the aesthetic qualities of the photograph and what it conveyed:

> The blur adds to the overall quality of the image and adds to the story around it..

> It's quite painterly to me, the way the light is casting half his face and the expression. It's quite an emotive … I guess it's almost expressionist

> I think what makes this image so dynamic or so emotive to me is the fact that it is a poor image and he's not trying to aestheticize everything, he's capturing the expression and the mood raw.

> It's interesting because in some ways it is a snapshot, and I don't mean that in any degrading way. […] Some of it actually looks out of focus. It's almost as if he's picked the camera up and snapped.

> There are so many narratives going on, you don't know so you read your own into it.

Participants also used words like 'honest', 'poignant' and 'intimate', making connections between the captured image and the values and emotions for both soldier and photographer. The participants from various groups also referenced past wars, including the First World War (because it could almost be in a muddy trench), the Korean War and the Vietnam War. Indeed, Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin (WPP judges) had criticised Hetherington's 'predictable' photograph for recalling the Vietnam images of Larry Burrows or Don McCullin, but Hetherington responded that he had been deliberately alluding to Vietnam in his 'visual strategy' in Afghanistan: 'I'm interested in how we all carry an image library in our heads that we can cross reference to create layers of meaning' (cited in Kennedy 2015: 165). This notion of an 'image library' is brought to life in our participant reflections, especially where the visual memories of war coincide with trauma.

It was particularly valuable to be able to show all the RAW images on Hetherington's camera in sequence, placing the WWP photo in the context of production and the other events of the day. Our access to the archive, with Tim's hard drives, and cameras, allowed us to explore together the photograph beyond its final presentation in the mainstream media context. What became apparent was just how dark the original image is, so that a glance through the RAW digital files would not have indicated to the naked eye a possible award-winning photograph.

> The whole lot, there isn't a single image that would make it to news. Maybe the one with the guy with the cigar. If we'd see a dark picture like that, most of us would just hit the delete button.

> I'd have to say, I think he was a bit lucky with that one because in that set, there's nothing which is prizeworthy …

Showing the photograph in its original RAW form prompted discussion on the technical processing aspects, and what might be considered acceptable, but also the embedding strategy where journalists or photographers live with soldiers for many weeks or months at a time. This chimes with concerns around how embedding might work to depoliticize journalism (Danchev 2011, Kennedy 2015), but also a recognition that the everyday and intimate moments would be difficult to capture without such building of trust. As one participant said: 'When you're living with people, you're their family and they're your family basically'.

This notion of trust gained in extreme circumstances was examined in a follow-up video clip. We showed a 3-minute video directed by Sam Sapin (2010) which included an interview with Tim Hetherington following his nomination for the Rory Peck Awards (2008), accompanied with footage from the *Restrepo* film depicting the soldiers' traumatized reaction to the shooting of Sergeant Larry Rougle. Hetherington recounts how one soldier had asked him to stop filming, but then later apologized and said he understood he 'had a job to do'. Photographer participants related this to their own ethical practice: 'I think the most important thing at first is looking this guy as a person, not a subject'.

As others have noted, a key theme of Hetherington's work is masculinity and yet it also explores the vulnerability of young men which is often less visible in depictions of combat troops (Bjerre 2017). It is Hetherington's ability to offer diverse and sometimes contradictory portrayals which our participants picked up on, offering civilian audiences a humanized window into the soldiers' world.

> … he generally refuses to describe any singular view. He doesn't allow you to create these categories of masculinity because I think the next scene in the documentary is really jarring because you see them all jumping up and down dancing to a stupid song.[…] He doesn't allow you to have this picture of super masculine gun-waving soldiers. He shows them as boys and as men as friends. (female photojournalism student)

However, there was also criticism for not allowing the diversity of perspectives to extend to the Afghan people also living in the Korengal valley:

> I think it's also important to acknowledge that there is another party involved in the documentary who don't have as much agency as to what gets shown and that's the Afghan people. They do go into villages to show there have been casualties so there's that level of honesty but, obviously, you are very much viewing the engagement with them from the soldiers' perspective. (female photojournalism student)

One military participant very nicely captured his own reluctance to admire the 'beauty' of the filmmaking in his memory of seeing the documentary *Restrepo* with a group of soldier 'buddies', (he jokingly says 'I wouldn't want this repeated' referring to his Army mates rather than the research context):

> When the film first came out, when 'Restrepo' came out, several buddies and I went to see it, and my friends that went to see it with me were uniformed soldiers. And we all came out saying, 'Yeah, that's what it was like.' And it's a neutral film. It's incredibly beautiful from the standpoint of people that were there, because, yes, they all recognised that every man has to cry. […] For me, and I wouldn't want this repeated, but it was the professionalism of the photography, the beauty of the photography, where he authentically captures the feelings that those guys went through who were there without a political message one way or the other in fact.

For the group of 'uniformed soldiers', the film represented 'what war is like' whilst refusing to engage in the wider political debates about the war. This certainly chimes with Hetherington's own words about his interest in documenting young men's relationships 'on the side of a mountain' (Hetherington, cited in Kennedy 2015: 166), but we can also see a hint of masculine insecurity acknowledged by the participant in his admiration of its beauty.

Debating the 'good' conflict image, media selection conventions, and moral spectatorship: Libya 2011

In another activity, participants were asked to place in order of preference the images which they would choose to illustrate a magazine article. The four photographs were all shot by Tim Hetherington during the anti-Gaddafi uprising and civil war in Libya, 2011.

This activity particularly generated some lively and interesting discussions. We deliberately picked four photographs that depicted different aspects of the conflict (see Figure 1): (A) civilians (including children) who posed for the camera holding

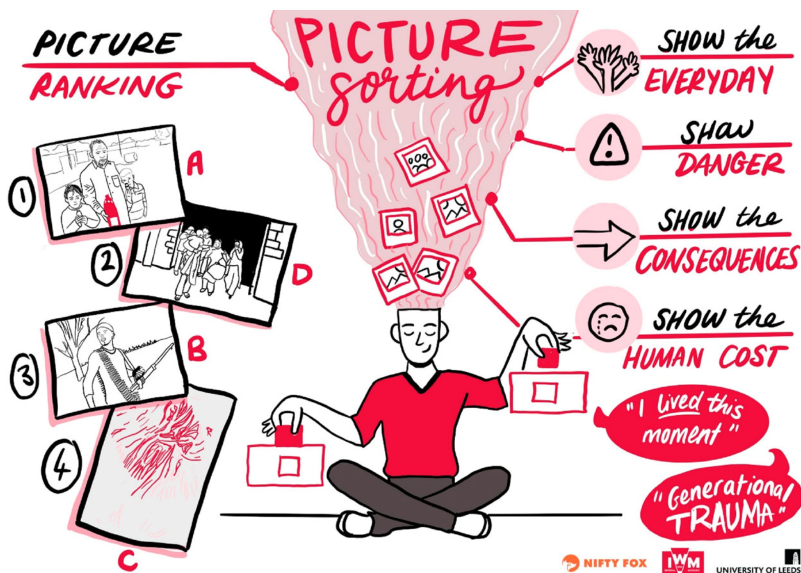

FIGURE 1. Picture sorting task. Nifty Fox Creative illustrations to capture the discussions with our refugee groups in Greater Manchester, July 2021. Copyright: Nifty Fox.

up unexploded munitions in the street; (B) a young fighter with a machine gun and ammunition slung across his torso, looking into the distance in the brightly lit sunshine; (C) a blood stained mortuary tray which was quite ambiguous and difficult to determine without explanation; and (D) a family fleeing from their home and caught in action rather than a posed image.

By asking our participants to play the role of picture editor, we were keen to see which images they picked as their preferences, the degree of consensus, and the aesthetic and ethical judgements which guided their selection process.

We first consider our refugee groups in Greater Manchester, as we observed different patterns to their selection judgements and reasons compared to the IWM London groups. The participants in these groups disliked the picture of the fighter (B), staring into the sun with his gun and ammo, because it pictured a 'superhero' figure who 'likes fighting'. Instead, they chose A (the children holding the munitions) or D (the family escaping). The message they were keen to convey was about the consequences of war for multiple generations of families.

> If I were to choose a picture, I would choose D because this is how most journeys of refugees start. They may just be running with the idea that, 'We move away for a while. We're coming back,' and never see this house again.
>
> It's very familiar. I saw that in our country, in Iraq, and especially in my city.
>
> And I think D is good at showing the chaos and how quickly things can change and you have to move so quickly.
>
> I think D also shows the generational trauma. So it's just not one generation. It's three different generations that are being traumatised, and I think the younger ones, maybe they live their life in trauma afterwards as well.

Empathetic concern is expressed here through references to their own experiences, and even projected fears for the future trauma of the younger children. Whereas the refugee groups had picked D (showing the family rushing out of a building) as their first or second choice, the participants in London openly disagreed about the image.

> Female 4: I think the picture by itself lacks context because it's a really familiar thing of people, presumably, in a Middle Eastern country who are having to flee their homes because of some kind of threat. You can see the emotion on their faces and it's very sad to see children there and everything but I think we're so desensitised to this kind of image …
>
> Male 4: I completely disagree. I think I want to know who they are and what they're doing so I completely disagree with that.
>
> Male 3: It shows the consequence of war.
>
> Female 1: D is a little bit like trauma porn for me. It's a little bit like you said, that distance, it's just … He's not engaging, he's just taking … It's not criticising, it's naturalising that view of displacement. It's a consequence of war and it's a shame but it's not engaged or critical.

To some degree, the concerns expressed here relate to how *other* audiences might see the picture of people 'in a Middle Eastern country', and the desensitization that they/we have towards such familiar images. To be clear, the first participant is critiquing a racist or colonial perspective and not affiliating herself with that position. There is a suggestion of compassion fatigue, the idea that news media's incessant pace of extremely negative stories prompts audience aversion (Moeller 1999). The disagreement emerges as the female speakers take on more of a reflexive 'meta-observer' position that critiques Hetherington, media reporting conventions, and others' possible responses (Mortensen and Trenz 2016).

Although we cannot make any wider generalizations based on our small groups, it was striking how the groups of people who had been displaced themselves expressed a preference for this image *because* it showed the consequences for civilians in a war situation, whereas the photography and politics students viewed this through a critical lens which questions the colonial and objectifying gaze of western photojournalism. Conflicting ideas between the focus groups regarding this image support the argument that although there may be a dominant message in a picture, 'words and images carry connotations over which no one has complete control' (Hall 1997: 270). We are not suggesting a single correct way to interpret the photographs; rather we are interested in how participants discuss the storytelling potential of the images, and identify the thematic and aesthetic qualities which would make each a 'good' image to illustrate the war in Libya.

Our London groups were however also critical of the Libyan fighter image (B), likening it to a *Vogue* cover or clothing advert 'if you cut out the gun', or a pose with a guitar. One noted that if they were pro-war they would pick B, noting its 'glorifying' potential. But it also opened up discussion as to whether the attention given to his own appearance, made him 'relatable' to young people: 'You've got to look good when you go to war'.

> Female (army reservist): It's heroic masculinity, very modern, very cool but, from his perspective, what's wrong with that? From anyone's perspective, is it necessarily that people should be in a right state when they're fighting in conflict?
>
> Male (journalist and student): No, to me, again, it's the distance between what war is really about and how it's being presented.
>
> Female (army reservist): Why is war not really about that, about a young man who very much cares about his image because his image is, potentially, part of why he's taken up the cause he's taken up, because he identifies with it?

One participant touched on the possible complicity here between photographer and subject, a self-awareness that Hetherington himself was fascinated by, where fighters perform for the camera, drawing upon their own 'image libraries' of past conflicts and popular culture (Hetherington 2010b, Kennedy 2015).

> Male: It's kind of like, there's a sort of self-awareness of his position as a photographer there […] I think, you know, Tim Hetherington is aware of that, and

> buying and feeding into that, in a way. […] these fighters are using a photographer there to show their position, their strength as a fighter, holding a machine gun in civilian clothes, if you like, it's kind of like taking advantage of photography.

The image preferences were more diverse in these later groups, with some people also questioning us about the task, saying they need to know the purpose or perspective of the magazine, recognizing the political potential in emphasizing certain portrayals. As opposed to the apoliticality noted in *Restrepo*, such discussions highlighted the undeniably political nature of mediated conflict imagery, undetachable from the broader problematic visual history of colonial or popular culture representations, whilst paradoxically performing its role as concerned witness to the consequences of war.

Choosing between truth and beauty: diary insights into ethical dilemmas

Finally we shared a digitized diary extract from the Libyan conflict where Hetherington discusses his concerns about the over-aestheticization of war, choosing beauty over truth: 'we don't reveal the truth of the situation of war in extreme for the sake of creating more beautiful images'.

> Today I photographed men making the victory sign over the charred remain of bodies from an airstrike against Qadaffi forces. The smell from their charred bodies stuck in my nose so much so that I found it hard to get off me for some time. I thought those pictures somehow more important than the other more aesthetically composed ones I was making because somehow they were more honest and more revealing of the fact that war is a merciless exercise in the raw nature of power. (© IWM Documents.27179/a/0328)

This extract prompted a lot of appreciation for the internal struggles expressed, especially the tension in showing the 'merciless exercise' of war whilst or choosing the 'white lies' of a more aesthetically acceptable version to be printed in the media. The first two quotations are from our refugee groups:

> Female 1: So after witnessing whatever he's witnessed, if there were not ethics maybe stopping him from showing certain images, he would have just pushed out there every single picture he's photographed. But this is an internal conflict of, should I just show the reality? Or should I just present what is acceptable ethically?

> Female 2: Really it's too hard when someone goes there and saw and lived this life, they understand what he saw there. Therefore, he tried to transfer the truth. In my opinion, he makes his job perfectly.

Others in this group commented on the fact that the people who are living in conflict situations might only see their local news, and be aware of the views from their region, so that international (photo)journalists do an important and difficult job, sometimes even 'killing themselves inside' to document such events for different

audiences. Our London participants were also interested in the ethical dilemmas posed in the diary extract, but their discussions tended to view his reflections within the context of the constraints of the photojournalistic industry:

> Male 1: If he comes back with an abundance of photographs of horrible atrocities and blood and charred bodies, maybe nothing is going to be used at the end of the day. He actually needs to think about what he's producing to make the viewers happy.
>
> Male 3: It's a personal responsibility, I think, on the part of the photographer about what message they're trying to get across, what their agenda is or the agenda they're being paid to do.

Our participants thought that this kind of diary artefact also provided an insider perspective not often included in photography exhibitions.

> Female: I'd be really interested, if I went to a photography exhibition at a museum, to hear the photographer talk about his own experience and not just the photographs he's taken. These photographs are the journey that he's been on and it was interesting to read how he felt and what his thoughts and feelings were and the smells and sights that he experienced.

In fact, the diary from Libya is currently being digitized for display on the museum's Hetherington webpages following the discussion generated from our workshops (https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/tim-hetherington). Providing personal production-related contexts for the 'end-products' of images displayed in museums offers an intimate perspective and foregrounds the ethical and industry-related concerns behind such often-familiar images.

Finally, the feedback survey completed by participants asked what they had enjoyed and how it could be improved. This served to reinforce our own perceptions on the value of such workshops.[3] The comments were overwhelmingly positive, noting the challenging content but also the 'privilege' of seeing the image-making process through the lens of Hetherington's approach, 'deepening' their understanding and their interest in both Hetherington's work, and the museum's archiving procedures. But overwhelmingly the most common feedback we received was on how participants had enjoyed hearing others' perspectives: 'hearing different viewpoints'; and seeing the work 'from other's point-of-view'. Many expressed enthusiasm for further workshops and they were keen to hear about any planned exhibition. Whether viewed as public outreach for the museum, or as a research tool to explore the social construction and negotiation of meanings in a group context (Lunt and Livingstone 1996), the social nature of the sessions was acknowledged and appreciated by our participants.

[3]We did not collect written feedback from the refugee groups as we observed that the consent procedures had already placed a burden on those who did not necessarily have good understanding of written English and we therefore only collected verbal feedback.

Conclusions

In a sense, the findings in this article represent a conversation between the interested members of the public, the curators, researchers, and the collection itself, in a manner not often undertaken in war photography studies or museum work dedicated to war photography. We are not presenting visitor questionnaires or index cards collected on the way out of an exhibition, but in-depth reflections elicited by selected digitized objects from the collection. Through their discussions of Hetherington's working practices and the images he made, the participants also imaginatively brought Hetherington into the conversation. We contend that such multiple perspectives are valuable and deserve to play a role in shaping interpretations of collections and in photography studies.

War photography studies have focused on certain photographers, iconic imagery and the familiar tropes of war. Audience research still remains the 'poor relation' in this research agenda. Our study shows how it is important to recognize the deep thinking and multidimensional appreciation of audiences when it comes to image-making and distribution practices. People bring their own knowledge and lived experience to engaging with such imagery, and when encouraged and given the space to reflect, they provide a variety of insightful perspectives on how and what images communicate.

Those who have been driven from their homes show particular empathy for the other humans depicted in both intimate and chaotic images – but they also appreciate that photographers go to warzones to document the atrocities and devastation – certainly the refugees in our groups emphasized the importance of showing this, and how the trauma continues beyond conflict. They were less concerned with the notion of the western colonial gaze and instead expressed faith in the capability of photography to 'transfer a real moment' for audiences. We met the refugee groups at their meeting centres, and not the museum, but it is possible that we were viewed as museum representatives and authority figures responsible for perpetuating such a western colonial gaze, thus leading to a reluctance to criticize the objects we brought with us.

It is not surprising that different groups tended to engage with Hetherington's work through their own knowledge and experiences. But the wider point is that the openness of visual media and the diversity of perspectives should be seen as strengths for museum workers rather than a weakness or a threat to expert knowledge. Edwards (2001: 10) writes of the 'infinite recodability of content' of photographs, where they can 'pick up new meanings' through 'processes of production, exchange, and consumption' and become culturally and socially salient to people in new ways, in different contexts (Edwards 2001: 10). For IWM, the workshops generated valuable knowledge exchange with distinct communities (some of whom would not normally visit the museum) on difficult questions surrounding the ethics of image making and recontextualization practices in the media and museum settings. The discussions provided insights into dealing with challenging content, making the museum better placed to interpret some of the sensitive subjects covered, such as the presence of youth combatants, for public audiences in the

future. For curators, learning from and understanding the collections is a constant on-going process. The workshops exposed how diverse audiences vary in their understanding and meaning-making, providing IWM curators with valuable insight to better inform the selection of images and diary extracts for display. At this point in time, the belongings of a photojournalist/filmmaker are moving into historical record as a museum collection, and the workshops gave us the opportunity to gather reactions before it became an established part of a museum archive, documented and 'ordered' in often standardized terms. We think this is especially valuable for an archive such as Hetherington's because he strove to find diverse ways to communicate the complex narratives and contradictory ideas at the heart of war.

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