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Introduction to the Special Issue on Tim Hetherington and conflict imagery

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The inspiration for this special issue started with an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)-funded international research networking project (2020-2022), led by the University of Leeds and Imperial War Museum (IWM), in partnership with the Bronx Documentary Center and the International Center of Photography (both in New York). The network project centred on the legacy of award-winning British photographer and film-maker, Tim Hetherington, who was mortally wounded in Misurata, Libya in 2011 while covering the civil war. IWM acquired Hetherington's complete archive in November 2017, including photography and video work from Liberia (2003-2007), Afghanistan (2007-2008) and Libya (2011), and handwritten journals and correspondence, cameras, tear sheets, and publications featuring his photography. With the collection offering a unique insight into Hetherington's work and working practices, the IWM were keen to develop research and public engagement activities, and so the network was formed (https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/tim-hetherington).

The network was timed to feed into the IWM's documentation and interpretation of Hetherington's work, contributing expert analysis through a series of research events but also garnering insights from public engagement workshops held in tandem (see Parry et al. in this issue). In so doing, the network project aimed to generate multi-perspectival understandings of the archive by engaging with Hetherington's associates, contemporary photojournalists and film-makers, scholars, and interested members of the public. A key aim of our activities, including this special issue, is to promote greater understanding of Hetherington's work alongside wider compelling concerns about the practice and ethics of image-making during conflict. As part of the network, a series of seminars and workshops were facilitated that encompassed themes such as the notion of humanitarian photography, mediated performances of military masculinity and brotherhood, and how professional values and experiences for those producing conflict and post-conflict imagery are being re-shaped in the digital era. This special issue is one of the outcomes of this process. Readers accessing it at the time of its publication might also like to visit the IWM London's exhibition '*Storyteller: Photography by Tim Hetherington*', running from 20 April to 29 September in 2024 (https://www.iwm.org.uk/events/storyteller-photography-by-tim-hetherington).

A museum exhibition, international research network, and a journal special issue, all dedicated to one person, undoubtedly contributes to a commemorative and even celebratory treatment. In promoting Hetherington's work, we are imbuing his work with cultural and intellectual value. Perhaps this is most substantively demonstrated in the archiving of his images and personal artefacts for future generations in a national museum. But it is important to recognize that Hetherington was critically ambivalent when it comes to the heroic archetype of the Western war photographer.

A graduate of both Oxford and Cardiff Universities, Hetherington brought an intellectual curiosity to his image-making work, constantly challenging himself and others on the

responsibilities that accompany the witnessing of atrocities, or on the ethical dilemmas of capturing war through an aestheticized lens for a global audience. He was uncomfortable with the 'parachute' form of war journalism, when (often Western) reporters and photographers stay for a few weeks of intense fighting before moving on to the next conflict or disaster. He continued to live in Liberia following his documenting of the civil war there in 2003, and in 2006 he worked as an investigator for the United Nations Security Council's Liberia Sanctions Committee. His book combining photography, oral testimony and personal writing, '*Long story bit by bit: Liberia retold'* (2009) was also exhibited by Human Rights Watch as part of their film festival in New York in the same year (Human Rights Watch 2009).

Plenty of Hetherington's work includes the action shots of young combatants posing with weapons. But he also wanted to examine the causes of political violence and explore how one navigates the boundaries between bearing witness and providing testimony, even when it implicated those he had previously accompanied in Liberia, for example. The conflicted nature of Hetherington's approach to his own work is perhaps a reflection of a wider sense of crisis identified by David Campbell in his writing on the debate surrounding Hetherington's winning World Press Photo image of an exhausted soldier in Afghanistan (Campbell 2009: 57; see also Kennedy 2015): 'photojournalism suffers a near permanent condition of anxiety and crisis, a condition that is a product of the nature of photojournalism and that is thus unlikely to disappear anytime soon'. The photojournalistic industry uneasily balances its roles as both a complicit partner in the 'war machine', and its watchful, verifying eye.

Within this context, Hetherington also questioned the labels of 'concerned photographer' or 'war photographer', and the limitations that came with a protective approach to 'photography':

> If you are interested in mass communication, then you have to stop thinking of yourself as a photographer […] My point about not being a photographer is that we can't protect photography – forget photography – when we are interested in the authentic representation of things outside of ourselves. (Hetherington, interviewed by Kamber 2010, n.p.).

He was not interested in preserving photography, or paying reverential attention to aesthetic techniques or rules. For Hetherington, the goal was to reach 'as many people as possible' through different forms of 'multilayered' media (ibid.). In speaking of authentically representing the 'things outside of ourselves' Hetherington intended to tell engaging stories of real people through long term involvement and reflective practice. He insisted that he did not want to simply document people living in difficult circumstances, but to produce 'useful' work, whilst finding the humour, care, and vulnerability in those both facing and perpetrating the violence of war. This philosophy is reflected in Hetherington's own writings, in interviews, and in reflections of those he worked closely with, such as James Brabazon and Sebastian Junger (Hetherington 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011; Junger 2013).

In this regard, Hetherington was not only renowned for his photojournalism. He had a multi-media approach, using a mixture of photography, exhibition, video installations, books, films and spoken word. He was said to bring a 'poetic sensibility' towards the subjects of his images, together with an ability to work in creative and surprising ways, for example, combining photographs, sound and video in gallery installations (Stuart Hughes 2018). As a result, his work has attracted much scholarly attention – especially his photographic work

(*Infidel,* 2010) and documentary film-making in Afghanistan (*Restrepo*, 2010, with Sebastian Junger) – and with particular regard to his 'debunking' of soldierly masculinity (Bjerre 2017; Kinsella 2020), his capturing of the 'sensuality of life' at the battlefront (Burgoyne 2017), and his 'transmedia' approach that attempted to reach the widest possible audiences in the 'post-photographic' age (Campbell 2013; Kennedy 2015).

Another of Hetherington's interests that has garnered scholarly attention was the notion of a 'feedback loop'. He took to understand the 'feedback loop' as the ways in which men and women in warzones internalise popular culture and media representations of war (news, film, photography and games), and co-opt them in their own self-representations via social networks and media. He believed these practices perpetuated a continuous loop between popular culture images, fighting experience and public perceptions of war. A number of the articles in this special issue critically engage with the 'feedback loop' in relation to Hetherington's body of work (Gilks, Popple, Burgoyne), as we outline in the article summaries below.

As guest editors working across the fields of media and communication, memory studies, and museum curatorial practice, Hetherington provides a fascinating case study precisely because of his own critical awareness of the circular and constitutive nature of media representations, and the importance of reaching diverse audiences. There is something unsettled and unsettling in his self-reflections as an image-maker regarding the problematic field of conflict photography. A sense of frustration pervades his dislike of being labelled, and his longing for attentive audiences who will take time to contemplate the complex lives of the people he pictured. Hetherington's early death, aged 40, brings a sense of unfinished potential, a tragic loss for family and friends, but also the loss of a serious and reflective voice in a field of visual storytelling, with its rapidly evolving crises in its technologies, economies and ethics.

The articles that follow extend some of these considerations, with a particular focus on Hetherington's period of embedding (2007-2008) with the US Army's 173rd Airborne Brigade in Afghanistan, working with Sebastian Junger on the documentary film *Restrepo* (2010) alongside other related projects (Infidel, Sleeping Soldiers).

Our first three articles by Mark Gilks, Paul Lowe, and Simon Popple each focus on the photographic and filmic representations of Afghanistan, contributing distinctive perspectives albeit with overlapping themes. Mark Gilks takes a hermeneutic-phenomenological approach in his discussion of Hetherington's understanding and application of the 'feedback loop', focusing on three dominant aesthetic themes: militarised masculinity; the ideal of the professional soldier; and the paradoxical absurdity of war. In discussion of his three themes, Gilks demonstrate an aesthetic and historical continuity between Hollywood and the soldiers' performances for the camera. Gilks' primary aim is to develop a theoretical framework for understanding how artistic representations of war influence the behaviour of soldiers in war. This is intended to accompany what Gilks identifies as Hetherington's 'visual explanations' of this phenomenon. Through this hermeneutic-phenomenological approach, Gilks defines the feedback loop 'as the embodiment and reenactment of historically contingent aesthetic forms', with the soldiers' bodily gestures performing the aesthetic influence of past media genres.

Our second article by Paul Lowe also situates Hetherington's work in Afghanistan within other historical depictions of soldiers, in this case with an emphasis on the periods of

boredom or 'killing time' in between moments of combat. As Lowe points out, of the 240 pages of *Infidel* (2010), only 40 show soldiers actually in combat, with the remaining pages dedicated to photographs of them 'maintaining their base, passing the time playing cards, wrestling each other in play fights, and of course, sleeping'. Hetherington commented that the more time he spent in the Korengal valley, he became bored by photographing combat and more interested in the bonding between the men (Kamber 2010; Lowe this issue). The saying that 'war is 99 per cent boredom and 1 per cent sheer terror' is much repeated in slight variations, but these moments for bonding are also thought to be essential for military success. Lowe argues that the powerful emotional bonds between soldiers, and the shared intense physicality of outpost life, had been neglected by traditional scholarship on warfare, but this is now shifting with a recent 'turn' to embodiment and experience led by feminist interventions in International Relations. Lowe examines Hetherington's interest in these homosocial moments of bonding within the context of IWM's historical photographic collection, showing how muscular tattooed bodies, the domesticity of confined environments, card playing, hugging or fighting, and soldiers sleeping, have long offered a more intimate portrayal which also holds a clue to why men fight – 'they fight for each other'.

Simon Popple, in our third article, draws upon a different historical context to show how Hetherington used his photographic practice to negotiate the complexities of western traditions of picturing Afghanistan. Popple introduces both historical and contemporary practices to explore the evidence for the 'feedback loop' as an ongoing explanation for the visual (re)staging of Afghanistan, arguing that what Hetherington identified as a 'feedback loop' is part of a much older tradition of picturing conflict and combatants. Popple is concerned that the replay and repetition of certain visual tropes from war can act as a barrier to understanding the meaning of individual events, when portrayals become subsumed into existing culturally acceptable templates. But, he argues, photography can also become a means of contestation: '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' (Popple, this issue). Comparing photography from the second Afghan War (1878-1880) with contemporary practitioners, including Hetherington, Popple shows how they use emblematic signifiers and historic motifs of occupation, but also expose that tradition to scrutiny.

Our fourth full-length article switches attention to the way audiences interact with Hetherington's work and practice, based on visually-led workshops that invited groups to respond to photographic images, video and a diary extract. Providing members of the public with rare access to digitised images and artefacts from the new Hetherington collection at IWM London, Katy Parry, Greg Brockett and Katy Thornton facilitated discussion of key issues such as intimacy, masculinity, the 'good' conflict photograph, and ethical dilemmas in recording atrocities. The wider context for this study is the positioning of photography, and especially photojournalism, within a museum context, and the imperative for national museums to engage meaningfully with diverse communities who can contribute insightful perspectives to new collections. The six workshops included veterans and their families, refugees, photography students, and museum volunteers, who participated in various visually-elicited activities. With audience research relatively neglected in war photography scholarship, Parry et al. argue for the importance of recognizing the contemplative and

multidimensional appreciation of audiences when it comes to image-making and distribution practices.

Our invited Afterword by Robert Burgoyne provides final reflections on Hetherington's achievements and in particular his 'troubling' of the 'genre lineage' of conflict photography. Focusing on *Infidel* (2010) and *Restrepo* (2010), Burgoyne argues that 'Hetherington's subtle subversion of the "feedback loop" constitutes the most original and effective contribution of his work to the growing cultural image bank of war'. As an example of such an 'interruption', Burgoyne presents the contrasting in *Restrepo*, of the muscled hyper-masculinity at the outpost with the 'the emotional, wrenching, individual interviews he conducts with them after their deployment'.

This special issue undoubtedly mirrors may of the thematic concerns of the established scholarly focus on Hetherington's award-winning work in Afghanistan and his collaborations with Sebastian Junger. This leaves promising avenues for further study, especially his extended affiliations with the people of Liberia over many years, as well as projects in Sierra Leone, Angola, Kenya and Nigeria, and finally in Libya. We encourage others to use the collection for further research, much of which is publicly available on the IWM website (https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/tim-hetherington).

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