



VIETNAM  
DEPRIMED



'Hungry man, reach for the book: it is a weapon.'

Bertolt Brecht

## **Vietnam Deprimed**

'The horror, the horror.' This ambiguous quote ends Francis Ford Coppola's epic Vietnam film, *Apocalypse Now*, which, as in Conrad's novella, implies that the real heart of darkness lies not in the orientalist inhabitants of the jungle, but in the Europeans who brutalise them. The horror of war, particularly of the kind perpetrated in Vietnam is a well known and explored fact. Or is it? We might know in an abstract sense that a rifle can maim and kill, but do we really know how violently?

*Vietnam Deprimed* is a visual experiment which aims to engage with two issues. First, the way mass media show, or rather don't show, the graphic horror caused by war. Second, the way popular culture can normalise or even fetishise weapons, disconnecting them from the violent physical effects they have on human bodies.

The first half of the book will explore in essay form the notion of what horror is, how the consequences of the Vietnam War have affected the ability of the media to show it, and the ways that popular culture helps to normalise weapons and war while understating their violence. It will round off with a brief discussion of the approach used to create the second half of the book.

The second half of this book attempts to reconnect weapons and violence more directly by positioning images of Vietnam-era weapons opposite medical archive images of their effects on people. The intent is to visually deprime the viewer, to shock the readers out of their accepted way of viewing weapon and wound as isolated images, and persuade them to reconsider them as profoundly connected.

### **Looking at Horror**

On encountering a sight like a vicious wound or mutilated corpse most people feel horror, a mixture of disgust and fear. Horror is a variable quantity, and what triggers this response is contingent on the make-up of the individual viewing it, their background history, their psychological state at the moment of encounter and myriad other factors. A doctor used to treating trauma injuries may be less appalled than someone who has never seen a gunshot wound. For some people this experience can trigger other emotional responses, perhaps embarrassment at viewing the suffering of another, or, inversely, a feeling of voyeurism at witnessing something that is taboo to observe.

Horror is 'always subject to historical change'.<sup>1</sup> Only a few centuries ago, scenes of horror were more common in European societies than they are now and therefore more normal. Healthcare was less effective and disease rife, death a distinct possibility at many stages of life. Wars were fairly regular events, mutilation and violent death were so common as to be parts of the judicial process, and such punishments were often carried out as public spectacles for all to witness.

The last two centuries, however, have seen advances in healthcare which have radically reduced mortality and changes in justice that have led to 'the disappearance of the tortured, dismembered, amputated body ... exposed alive or dead to public view'.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, much of the developed world has experienced a relatively long period of uninterrupted peace. Apart from random accidents and freak violent acts, sights of horror have disappeared from our lives.

The disappearance of these sights from view, combined with the simultaneous rise of mass media and global communication means that, for most people, our encounters with the horrors of war will be predominantly through images. Sontag argues that, as a result, 'the

1 John Taylor, *Body Horror* (New York, 1998) p.2  
2 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (1975) p.8

understanding of war among people who have not experienced [it] is now chiefly a product of the impact of these images'.<sup>3</sup> This is significant in many respects, not least the fact that our encounters with scenes of horror now pass through numerous layers of filtering, from what the journalist in the field chooses to photograph or film, to what military or government handlers may allow to be filed, or to what an editor chooses to run. Equally, such dependence on images is problematic because, however accurately they may depict a terrible scene, photographs are only 'at most a trace and not the thing itself'.<sup>4</sup>

Photographs can still generate a sense of horror, but they do so in a different way to encountering such sights in real life. Most obviously with a still photograph we are able to sit and study scenes that may have only been viewed for a fraction of a second by the photographer. This can variously heighten or undermine their shock value, depending on the image in question. Photographs may also exacerbate the voyeuristic tendency in witnessing horror because they ask 'viewers to stare at the scenes with impunity'.<sup>5</sup>

---

3 Susan Sontag, *On the Suffering of Others* (London, 2003) p.19

4 Taylor, *Body Horror*, p.5

5 Taylor, *Body Horror*, p.14

Despite these flaws in the representational ability of photography to show terrible things, it is important that we use it to do so, and that we look at the images that result. The alternative of simply not knowing about horrific events, particularly a man-made phenomenon like war, a phenomenon in which we are often to some extent complicit, is far more troubling. As Sontag writes, '...war tears, rends. War rips open, eviscerates. War scorches. War dismembers. War ruins.'<sup>6</sup>

Not to know this, or only to know it in the abstract sense of knowing something one has been told but never seen (even in a photograph), is courting disaster. John Taylor aptly sums up the problem: '...the use of horror is a measure of civility. The absence of horror in the representation of real events indicates not propriety so much as a potentially dangerous poverty of knowledge'.<sup>7</sup>

### **Vietnam: Three Effects on the Media**

Vietnam was notable because of the way the media were able to bring the brutality of the war onto the front page, and into people's homes. It was the first television war, and it was also the first largely uncensored (or, to be more accurate, ineffectively censored) war. There

<sup>6</sup> Sontag, *On the Suffering of Others*, p.4

<sup>7</sup> Taylor, *Body Horror*, p.11

have been innumerable changes in the way news media function since 1975, but there are three changes that have emerged as a direct result of the Vietnam War and which have detrimentally affected the way the media represent horror.

First, far greater restrictions are now placed on journalists covering wars. The war in Vietnam was lost by the media, or at least that was the story the US military consoled itself with, and correspondents congratulated themselves with. True or not, the belief in this has subsequently led the armed forces to impose greater restrictions on correspondents. During the Falklands War of 1992, for example, the Ministry of Defence only allowed a limited number of correspondents to join the naval task force, dressed them in military garb and attached them to specific units. The media simply had to accept these conditions because the military 'and only it controlled access to the warzone'.<sup>8</sup>

Since the Falklands War this technique, known as 'embedding', has become standard practice because it enables the military to keep track of what journalists are able to see and report, and places them in such close proximity to soldiers that a degree of bonding is

<sup>8</sup> Phillip Knightley, *First Casualty: The War Correspondent as Hero and Myth-Maker from the Crimea to Iraq* (London, 2004) p.478

inevitable. The result is that the stories journalists are able to report and the photographs that they are able to take can be directed by military priorities, and the negative elements of war, particularly death and injury, are more easily filtered by 'censorship at source'.<sup>9</sup>

The second development that has compromised the media's ability to depict war's horrors is the increasing use of remote and long range methods of killing. Again, Vietnam was the genesis of a practice which continues to the modern day. The ground war in Vietnam was violent, visually spectacular and, as it turned out, unwinnable. Towards the end of the war the US military turned instead to carpet bombing North Vietnam. Not only did this result in fewer American casualties, it was also impossible for journalists to report the effects, even when US bombers started illegally bombing neighboring Laos and Cambodia.

This approach has continued. A present day example is the Unmanned Aerial Vehicle or 'Drone' attacks carried out in remote areas of Afghanistan and, again illegally, in Pakistan. 'Drone' aircraft are remotely piloted by operators hundreds or thousands of miles away, and their attacks take place without warning and in areas journalists

have difficulty reaching. For the military this is the best of both worlds, with no danger of dead American pilots, and little likelihood of journalists bringing back inconvenient photographs of any bystanders killed in attacks. For Taylor this is part of a process of 'derealisation', in which war is depicted as being 'acted out by machines rather than on the bodies of people'.<sup>10</sup>

The third important development to emerge since Vietnam is the increasing tendency of the press to self-censor. This can be understood partly as a backlash against the graphic coverage of the Vietnam War. Media self-censorship is also related to a wide range of issues of taste, commonly banded together under the term 'propriety'. Press propriety is often construed as a moral matter, but as Taylor states, 'the press is not dedicated to forcing its audience to view horrific imagery and has no use for it in a regular moral or improving agenda of its own',<sup>11</sup> rather propriety is a matter of pragmatism or good business.

The most obvious respect in which this is true is that self-censorship is often necessary in order to facilitate present or future co-operation with outside organisations. For example, advertisers are unlikely to want their

<sup>10</sup> Taylor, *Body Horror*, p.158

<sup>11</sup> Taylor, *Body Horror*, p.3

<sup>9</sup> Knightley, *First Casualty*, p.479

advertisements for, say, skincare products opposite an image of someone immolated by napalm. Embedding is also a good example of this pragmatism, as a photographer may resist publishing controversial imagery of a war if it may damage their relations with the military and make future collaboration difficult. Don McCullin was repeatedly denied access to cover the Falkland's War, almost certainly because 'his type of war photography threatened the image of war that the military wanted to convey'.<sup>12</sup>

The result of these changes has been to make it rare to see extreme or disturbing images of war in news media. Though, as Taylor states, 'the bodies of allies and enemies are central to warfare',<sup>13</sup> they are consistently hidden or obscured. Stylisation of images, for example showing blood instead of actual injuries, and deflecting the attention of images to other subjects such as weapons and technology (what Stahl calls 'technofetishism')<sup>14</sup> are two ways this is achieved without appearing to scrimp on reporting events.

Ultimately, the machinery of war has become more important than human bodies, the logical result of long

standing military rhetoric which connects war to 'a basically empty, amoral space'<sup>15</sup> and which depersonalises soldiers into parts of a mechanism. Thus the tragedy for an audience of witnessing their own troops dying and the ethical problems of seeing enemies killed is lessened.

## **Entertainment Culture and Weapons**

As I have mentioned, news media have increasingly opted to show the hardware of war rather than the consequences, an effect described as 'technofetishism'. This tendency also extends into entertainment media, particularly cinema, where movies have helped to reposition public loyalties to the military away from increasingly irrelevant cold war ideologies towards technology.

In *Top Gun* (1986) sleek American aircraft (and some notably less sleek Soviet ones) provide a technoerotic thrill as they fight without actually fighting. Similarly, games like *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* boast 'more than 70 new and authentic weapons'<sup>16</sup> as a selling point. As well as distracting from the horror of war, media like this create a discourse in which high-tech, 'civilised' nations

---

<sup>12</sup> Knightley, *First Casualty*, p.479

<sup>13</sup> Taylor, *Body Horror*, p.157

<sup>14</sup> Roger Stahl, *Militainment, inc.* (New York, 2010) p.28

---

<sup>15</sup> Taylor, *Body Horror*, p.158

<sup>16</sup> *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* <http://store.steampowered.com/app/7940/>



have the right to dominate low- tech, 'barbarous' ones.<sup>17</sup> Another tendency in entertainment which is linked to technofetishism is the conflation of weapons with abstract moral principles. This is partly a consequence of America's relationship with guns, their enshrinement in the constitution, and their position in the narrative of a 'frontier spirit'. Problematically, however, this has led to the gun coming to embody ideas as diverse as justice and law-breaking, freedom and repression.

As examples of this conflicting moral message, in *Destry Rides Again* (1939) guns always represent criminality, as a frontier sheriff abandons them and brings armed lawbreakers to justice through non-violent means. By contrast in *Dirty Harry* (1971) the iconic Magnum revolver used by the protagonist comes to represent the idea of justice, albeit in the form of unsanctioned violence, rather than an impotent legal system. Weapons clearly are not capable of embodying or defending positive ideals in themselves, and are just as capable of defeating them or representing negative principles, but contemporary cinema frequently suggests otherwise.

The effects of weapons are also often highly stylised. In the long running television series *The A-Team*, a group of heavily armed soldiers of fortune are depicted as

<sup>17</sup> Stahl, *Militainment, inc.*, p.28

never killing (with one exception) or badly injuring their antagonists. Likewise computer games encourage an unrealistic view of weapons in which being shot can be solved by reloading a saved game and starting again.

These phenomena are not consequences of the Vietnam War, rather they have origins deep in American history, and reflect the the main priority of the US entertainment industry to distract audiences rather than lecture them. However, because the trauma of defeat in Vietnam was one which Americans came to terms with largely through media like cinema, and because of America's cultural hegemony, the resulting artifacts were exported and had a global influence.

## **Methodology and Conclusion**

There were three main inspirations for this project. Friedrich's *Krieg dem Krieg*, a book described as 'photography as shock therapy'<sup>18</sup> stunned me when I first saw photographs from it, but seemed too propagandistic and lacking in subtlety on repeated viewings. Eisenstein's *Towards a Theory of Montage* posed the idea that two images together could produce a new third meaning, an idea I found fascinating and wanted to explore in stills. Finally Brecht's *War Primer* was an important influence,

<sup>18</sup> Sontag, *On the Suffering of Others*, p.13

planting the idea that we are culturally primed for war. Vietnam, in turn, became the conflict that framed this project primarily because I had been assigned it as a subject. However, it was also appropriate because the majority of the weapons deployed in the Vietnam War and featured in this book remain in use today, and therefore the wound photographs in this book are ones that are seen first-hand by people in places as diverse as Iraq and Cambodia, Colombia and Sudan.

In terms of methodology, the majority of wound images came from a single archive of Vietnam War material, where cause of injury was usually attributed to a precise weapon and so it was relatively easy to match these to an appropriate photograph of a matching weapon. A few, more problematically, came from internet forums dedicated to injuries caused by weapons. Images of the weapons themselves were mainly taken from Wikipedia, and most were in turn taken from the US Defense Department. In the few cases where nothing appropriate was available, I used other sources. All sources are listed at the end of the book.

Sontag asked 'who believes today that war can be abolished? No one, not even pacifists'.<sup>19</sup> War cannot be abolished through global campaigns or international

<sup>19</sup> Sontag, *On the Suffering of Others*, p.4

treaties; these can only reduce it or manage it. Although I identify with the aims of pacifism, I didn't want to produce propaganda for what is a hopeless if admirable cause. Instead, I wanted to make a documentary or reference book that could be used to understand war better by cutting through the cultural miasma around the representation of conflict, which could perhaps deprive a viewer from the way they had learnt to think and feel about war, and let them look at it again, however briefly, with a fresh pair of eyes.

War and horror go hand in hand, however much the jargon and imagery of modern media and the military might suggest otherwise. Even the smallest, cleanest of wars still relies on extreme violence, often inflicted by accident or intent on people who by most moral codes are undeserving of it. Taylor asks 'what would it mean for civility if representations of war crimes were always polite'.<sup>20</sup> I think we should take his meaning of war crimes beyond the sense of the phrase in international law, because to some extent all wars are crimes. Whatever the inclination to turn away when confronted by something that horrifies us, we would do far better to ask ourselves why?

<sup>20</sup> Taylor, *Body Horror*, p.196

## Bibliography

Bertolt Brecht,  
*War Primer* (London, 1988)

Raymond Carr,  
*Images of the Spanish Civil War* (London, 1986)

Anthony DiMaggio,  
*When The Media Goes to War: Hegemonic Discourse,  
Public Opinion, and the Limit of Consent*  
(New York, 2009)

Sergei Eisenstein,  
*Towards a Theory of Montage* (1924)

Michel Foucault,  
*Discipline and Punish* (1975)

Ernst Friedrich,  
*War on War* (1924)  
extracts available from <http://tinyurl.com/5ghggs>

Stanley Greene,  
*Open Wound: Chechyna 1994-2003* (2003)

Phillip Jones-Griffiths,  
*Vietnam inc.* (London, 2001)

Phillip Knightley,  
*First Casualty: The War Correspondent as Hero and Myth-  
Maker from the Crimea to Iraq*  
(London, 2004)

Sarah Maltby and Richard Keeble,  
*Communicating War: Memory, Media and Military*  
(London, 2009)

Susan Sontag,  
*On the Suffering of Others* (London, 2003)

Roger Stahl,  
*Militainment, inc: War, Media and Popular Culture,*  
(New York, 2010)

John Taylor,  
*Body Horror* (New York, 1998)

Paul Virilio,  
*War and Cinema* (London, 1989)



'War is beautiful'

Filippo Tommaso Marinetti





M16A1  
5.56 mm Assault Rifle







Napalm B  
Petroleum/phosphorous based incendiary





M61  
Fragmentation Grenade





White Phosphorous  
Phosphorous based incendiary



MINE  
KITI - PERIODIC TEST  
LOT 7A-10-1A  
550

57A20



M16  
Anti-Personnel Mine







BM-13 Katyusha  
Multiple rocket launcher



HARVEY

M



Avtomat Kalashnikova 47  
7.62 mm Assault Rifle





'Agent Orange'  
Chemical defoliant





Boeing B-52 Stratofortress  
Strategic bomber





‘What you see here, caught in your night defences.  
These steel and glass cocoons for killing people.  
With tons of bombs, are just the consequences  
For all, and not the causes of the evil.’

Bertolt Brecht

## Image Sources

### Book Cover

'Dry Rain Forest' <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Dry\\_rainforest.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Dry_rainforest.jpg)> accessed 10th June 2012

### M16A1 Assault Rifle

'M16 5.56mm Rifle Photos' <<http://www.history.army.mil/books/Vietnam/tactical/images-full/fl1.jpg>> accessed 10th June 2012

'Phillipine Defense Forum' <<http://www.timawa.net/forum/index.php?topic=17111.0>> accessed 10th June 2012

### Napalm

'Napalm' <<http://toxipedia.org/display/toxipedia/Napalm>> accessed 10th June 2012

Slide VAS004841, No Date, Calvin Chapman Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. Accessed 9 Jun. 2012. <<http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=VAS004841>>

### M61 fragmentation grenade

'M26, M26A1 & M61' <<http://www.lexpev.nl/grenades/americas/united-states/m26m26a1m61.html>> accessed 10th June 2012

Slide VAS010383, No Date, Michael Mittelmann Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. Accessed 9 Jun. 2012. <<http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=VAS010383>>.

### White Phosphorous

'A-1E drops white phosphorus bomb' <[http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fichier:A-1E\\_drops\\_white\\_phosphorus\\_bomb\\_1966.jpg](http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fichier:A-1E_drops_white_phosphorus_bomb_1966.jpg)> accessed 10th June 2012

'White Phosphorous' <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Ayman2.jpg>> accessed 10th June 2012

### M16 Mine

'The Minefield: An Australian Tragedy in America's Vietnam War' <[www.japanfocus.org/-Greg-Lockhart/2447](http://www.japanfocus.org/-Greg-Lockhart/2447)> accessed 10th June 2012

Slide VAS012458, No Date, Michael Mittelmann Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. Accessed 9 Jun. 2012. <<http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=VAS012458>>.

### Katyusha

'Katyusha rocket launcher' <[http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/b4/RIAN\\_archive\\_303890\\_A\\_battery\\_of\\_Katyusha\\_during\\_the\\_1941-1945\\_Great\\_Patriotic\\_War.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/b4/RIAN_archive_303890_A_battery_of_Katyusha_during_the_1941-1945_Great_Patriotic_War.jpg)> accessed 10th June 2012  
Photograph VA030127, 27 August 1967, John Proe Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. Accessed 9 Jun. 2012. <<http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=VA030127>>.

### Avtomat Kalashnikova 47

'AK-47' <[http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/98/MP\\_Inspects\\_Captured\\_AK-47\\_Vietnam.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/98/MP_Inspects_Captured_AK-47_Vietnam.jpg)> accessed 10th June 2012  
Slide VAS012637, No Date, Michael Mittelmann Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. Accessed 9 Jun. 2012. <<http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=VAS012637>>.

### 'Agent Orange'

'Defoliation agent spraying' <[http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/82/Defoliation\\_agent\\_spraying.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/82/Defoliation_agent_spraying.jpg)> accessed 10th June 2012  
'Agent-Orange-dioxin-skin-damage-Vietnam' <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Agent-Orange-dioxin-skin-damage-Vietnam.jpg>> accessed 10th June 2012

### Boeing B-52 Stratofortress

'60 years in the skies' <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-2130465/60-years-skies-going-strong-The-amazing-career-B52-bomber.html>> accessed 10th June 2012  
Photograph VA003742, No Date, Douglas Pike Photograph Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. Accessed 9 Jun. 2012. <<http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=VA003742>>.

Thanks to Roger Bardon for proof reading,





[WWW.LEWISBUSH.COM](http://WWW.LEWISBUSH.COM)



2012

