The Theatre of War, or ‘La Petite Mort’

Stephen Mayes and Tim Hetherington

Tim Hetherington, photojournalist and filmmaker, was killed in Misrata on April 20th 2011 while covering the civil war in Libya. Shortly before his death, Hetherington’s friend and colleague Stephen Mayes talked with him about his fascination for the front line and what it had taught him about masculinity, aggression and war.

Tim Hetherington won the prestigious World Press Photo Award for his coverage of the Afghan conflict for Vanity Fair, which he later worked into the Academy nominated film “Restrepo” (co-directed with Sebastian Junger). This is a continuation of his ten-year exploration of aggression and masculinity that began when he lived in Liberia for five years, during which time he covered the brutal civil war with visceral intimacy.

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Death cannot exist without sex. There’s an obvious connection that without sex there is no life and without life there can be no death. It’s about flesh, pulsing blood and that hot, wet loss of control that marks the start of life and its end. We seek to manage the vicissitudes of life, to control our destinies but we abandon that control at orgasm and at death. It’s no accident that the French capture the experience of orgasm in the phrase ‘la petite mort’, expressing our joyous fear of the release that transports us from the world in the pure physicality that is the body taken out of the control of the mind. Shakespeare revels in the salacious metaphor of death meaning sex and in Sanskrit nirvana means to extinguish, to be blown away. Susan Sontag wrote, “What pornography is really about, ultimately, isn’t sex but death.”

We fear it yet we seek it, and we will find it. And what man cannot control society seeks to contain. The experience of both sex and death is held distant from polite society; we don’t see it, we don’t hear it and we don’t speak of it except in metaphor and the theatrical circumstances of fiction and of course in some representations of war. We must understand though that the out-of-control experience of war and the sexualized fetishes we attach to it, is experienced differently on the front line and on the home front. The theater of war means one thing to the actors and another to the audience and as we cannot witness the performance first hand (or so most of us hope), we are dependent on the image-makers to mediate the reality for our consumption. What better than photography to bring us into intimate yet vicarious contact with the action? The sweaty, bloody physicality of men performing society's wishes is caught in the frame for our prurient fascination.

“Society back home tends to eroticize war, to fetishise it and tends also to pathologise it,” says photographer and filmmaker Tim Hetherington, referring to the 300,000 American veterans currently known to be on medication, and also to society’s coy
fascination with the process of war. “I’m really suspicious when I hear people use the word pornographic about images coming out of a war. There is a desire to fetishise war, to make it pornographic, and I want to contest that. We sexualise killing at home. I’ve never heard a soldier call a dead body pornographic. Why is a picture of someone with his head blown off ‘pornographic’? Because it titillates you? It’s not that to the soldiers – they’re doing a job.”

This conflation of violence described in sexual language hints at a deep human interest and the interpretation of sensual, sexualised and aggressive masculinity. Its representation reaches back even before photography. Goya’s print series “The Disasters of War” was made twenty years before photography was invented and vividly depicts violence with a strong sexual dynamic. Hetherington looks even further back. “Look at The Iliad, which is all about war and sexuality – how can our princess leave us and go off with our enemy? It was over a woman and the control of sex.” It seems that the audience has always sought a sensual, sexual dynamic in its war reporting, finding in it the same horrified fascination through the ages. We want our men lusty, lusting and lusted. For some viewers images of aggression are about desire and for others it’s a vicarious expression of suppressed intent and for nearly all it’s about raw emotional fascination with the life forces of sex and death.

It’s easy to see how such fetishes develop. “Defining your masculinity is part of the process [of war]. You go to the front to prove yourself and you’ll be rewarded; defining your masculinity is part of the process.” “And the same is true of photographers,” Hetherington adds, including himself as part of the process and very much more than an invisible observer.

“Young men are instrumentalised by the state using their energy and aggression and that’s why they end up the vanguard of the fighting force. Young men have that energy that can be channeled and that energy is about defining themselves as men. And they’re willing to risk a lot to define themselves as men. And how does society deal with representations of that?”

Hetherington’s answer is to subvert by seduction. The apparent naïve honesty in his imagery wraps a subtle message. The series of images, “Sleeping Soldiers,” shows us fighting men naked, vulnerable and sensual in their beds. His images of fighting men out of ‘role’ as soldiers and revealed as men at play, often close and physical in their activity, create powerful sensual representations that overtake the fetish of the uniform. This is indeed about love and this is where the viewer’s confusion starts.

“War is one of the very few places where men can express love for each other without inhibition.” Hetherington’s work is very much about love, but on examination it’s less about sex. These are images that are explicitly masculine showing men in sensual intimacy with each other and with the camera, onto which the viewer imposes their own fantasies. The sexual energy of men on the front line is real but more often finds its
expression in displaced activities such as horseplay, exercise and of course fighting. But then the viewer steps in to share Hetherington’s intimate gaze, imposing secret desires on these public displays of physicality.

The mechanism of photography plays a particularly important part in the process, sharing a crucial role as it does in depicting the forbidden topics of sex and death. The erotic physicality of fighting flesh is an illusion part sought by the viewer and part imposed on the viewer. After all, photographers are performing for the audience too, working in collaboration with editors, and of course with the soldiers (often ‘embedded’, no less) to give the viewer a taste of what they want. While Hetherington’s work explores many aspects of these men, mixing sensual intimacy with more familiar representations of ‘kinetic’ warfare, he is clear that the sexual experience is more in the viewer’s mind than in the hot, dirty experience of conflict.

“Trying to understand my own fascination with conflict and war has become something that’s started to focus on what it means to be a man. What is it about war that really draws men? Is there something that’s connected with masculinity and the answer is yes.” Hetherington comments that editors stereotype certain subjects as “women’s subjects” and women are routinely assigned to cover issues such as pregnancy, domestic activities, women at work and similar subjects. “Well there are men’s subjects too, and most obviously one of the real male subjects is war,” he says, referring to frontline action (described as ‘the bang bang club’ by photojournalists Greg Marinovich and Joao Silva).² Sontag opens her book *Regarding the Pain of Others* with a discussion of Virginia Woolf’s 1938 essay “Three Guineas”, saying in summary, “Men make war. Men (most men) like war, since for men there is some glory, some necessity, some satisfaction in fighting...war is a man’s game, the killing machine has a gender, and it is male.”³

Hetherington takes this as the starting point for his work on the front line. “The fighting of war seems to be a particularly male preoccupation, wrapped up with aggression and masculinity. And yet when you come to the subject of war and looking it’s interesting that there are so few [other] straight men making the connections. I think they all get drawn into the thing of producing generic photography.” Pictures of equipment, uniforms and dramatic action dominate war reporting, disguising the humanity of the men that drive the war machine.

Many photographers have made serious and important studies of the war machine but so much war photography is about the equipment, the role of the soldier in uniform, the history and context of conflict. And yet says Hetherington, there’s more. “The truth is that the war machine is the software, as much as the hardware. The software runs it and the software is young men. And in some ways I’m part of the software. I was a young man once. I’m not so young any more but I get it, I get the operating system. I am the operating system, this is really the domain that I understand. I understood this back when I was living and working in Liberia. It dawned on me when I was with the fighters
that if there would be a choice between sitting in a refugee camp or being on the front lines and fighting I would be fighting. There’s something about me that, hell, I would be fighting. My interest is in the zone of conflict, with that software where you can see the code more clearly. My gaze is very particular. War is interesting because it’s where killing becomes legalized and if you’re not in that zone you’re far from the very place where people are killing and being killed.”

Here Hetherington makes a direct connection between sex and death. “We know that war is a zone of killing just as we know that the bedroom is a place of sleeping but also of sex. We know these are two intimate things, sex and killing, and we’re fascinated by them both but we have an inability to allow ourselves to represent them. Interestingly sex is the one that we allow ourselves to represent, and we call that pornography. Killing is something that we don’t allow ourselves to represent. It’s filtered out even though the photographers are taking the images of killing to the best of their ability, or indeed their desire. But those images are filtered out by the editors and by society itself.”

The imagery of war exists to fulfill a need and it’s shaped by photographers and editors to express social expectations, and indeed desires. The uniform has long been a fetish object, sexualised by generations of men and women, representing as it does so many male attributes of disciplined strength and channelled aggression. And with it comes the fascination of violence eroticised by those same qualities, enhanced by the exposure of raw flesh, hot blood and extreme emotion. What began as the Military-Industrial complex has evolved in recent decades into what James Der Derian has called the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment-Network, as strategists have embraced ever more subtle techniques to bottle the lightning of public opinion and to pacify dissent. This is a step beyond the age-old performance of nationalist propaganda. Learning the lessons of Vietnam, states around the world have come to embrace imagery as part of the very fabric of conflict, willingly aided by the image-makers and publishers serving the system. Seventy years after socialist realists launched their heroic vision of the man-machine in service of the Soviet state, image-makers and publishers continue to perpetrate the iconography of military fantasy. Maybe here the word pornography has a place, referring as it does to characterless objects devoid of history or any role beyond their visible form, empty vessels to receive our projections.

In recognizing our warriors as living men with all their frailties as well as strengths, rather than as mere mechanical operatives of political commands or as avatars of our most violent desires (and perhaps the repository of those now forbidden and shamed masculine virtues, those martial virtues, in which we take secret, even erotic pleasure), we will learn to separate our own longings from theirs. And in the process maybe we can learn a little more about the world and about ourselves.


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