

Neo-Vulturism in Contemporary Documentary Photography. Or: Do you remember Goma?

My friend, the English photographer Nigel Chandler, calls me 'King Vulture', ever since I took pictures in the Sarajevo morgue, pictures that in addition were awarded in the Dutch Silver Camera press photo competition. "Outrageous", his comment was. "They should have taken your press accreditations instead of giving you an award. Just flapping down to the morgue on a sunny day..."

In all the months in Sarajevo, Nigel never once set foot in the morgue. He would rather hang around in Dobrinja, especially then, the most dangerous part of town.

When the shellings subsided and Bosnian bureaucracy began to rear its head, Nigel moved to Mostar. He spent months on the frontline there, waiting for action, meanwhile a pocket edition of Hamlet at arm's length. Nigel told me of a strange psychological mechanism: once you get really involved, you reach a point where you transcend your fear. The mark of 'war photographer' is easily stamped on anyone who takes pictures in places where bullets and grenades occasionally fly around. The Belgian historian Jo Tollebeek once suggested the title 'disorder photographer'. A more sober term devoid of the heroic connotation implicit in the term 'war photographer'. Because the practice is not heroic. It's often only the aftermath, victims and damage, that are being photographed. The other side of the story rarely gets told: brutes and killers are not very fond of having their pictures taken while doing their job. Apparently they feel some embarrassment for the things they do. Images of the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia are very rare. Only Ron Haviv managed to portray Arkan's Tigers in action in Bjelina. The same holds true for the massacres in Rwanda. What remained where the piles of bodies the Ruandeese Patriotic Front (RPF) left untouched for the press. When the first massive Rwandese exodus headed for Tanzania, the press could pick and choose from the various cadaver-viewing daytrips organized by the victorious RPF. You didn't even have to pay 100 USD to rent a car from the Hutu's refugees – often the killers themselves – to get into Rwanda. If you simply stood on the bridge that crosses the boundary river, you could take close-ups from swollen, discoloured Tutsi corpses floating in the water.

The fact that brutes and killers don't like to be photographed, can be considered as a veiled compliment to photographers. We're being overestimated: they think that images are most certainly influential in the wheeling and dealing process that leads to political action. And sometimes this does happen. The shots of the Serbian concentration camps shocked the world. Nevertheless, the ethnic purification and civilian bombings continued. The only

mind-question'. The correct answer – shutter speed and film sensitivity – was rarely heard. In talkshows and magazines, photographers confessed how they had put down their cameras to start dragging dying children to the MsF-tent. Others were truly astonished when upon return they found out that there's a price to pay if you want to take pictures of dying people and mass graves and trucks filled with corpses. For those who simply couldn't accept the fact that they had to leave a part of their soul in Goma, the Dutch Association of Journalists kindly referred them to professional social workers who grabbed for this new market segment: disorder photographers in mental distress.

Vultures taking pictures of vultures. The ultimate form of incest. I heard a story about a photographer taking a shot of Nachtwey, Salgado and Morris, lined up shoulder to shoulder, shooting a cadaver dumping in Goma. The famous trio flew into a rage, and quite rightly so. It's a kind of betrayal and snitchery. The consumer should never know about the sometimes banal circumstances in which a photo is made. The only thing that truly matters, is the result. The best cooks never let their clients take a peek in the kitchen.

In Kigali, May 1994, I took a picture of a wounded Hutu surrounded by photographers. The Hutu sits on the ground like a broken man, a bloodstained jacket covers his head. Two photographers carrying bulletproof vests kneel in front of him. It's a tarnished image. Most people that see the photo invariably sympathize with the Hutu and denounce the photographers doing their job. 'Extraordinary striking', 'unusually revealing', are some of the comments I received for the embarrassing scene. The photo I took only seconds before, a close-up portrait of the Hutu – showing in detail the scabs and machete-gashes – gets a considerably less emotional response. And the image of me kneeling down in front of the Hutu and focussing on his scars doesn't exist.

My latest report was in Port-au-Prince (Haïti), where the ousted president Aristide was returning to his country. I didn't shoot dead corpses this time, simply because I didn't come across them. It was very different exactly a year earlier – when coup leader Cedras was also supposedly leaving and Aristide returning. The attaches – death squads – ruled at night and you would find the dead bodies strewn across the streets the next morning. Killed the Haitian way: hands tied, signs of tortures, machete-gashes and the bullet holes in the back. Every morning the guides gathered in our hotel lobby, eager to escort us for 50 USD to fresh corpses of butchered fellow countrymen. I heard an American arguing with a guide he had paid 200 USD. "No bodies, no bucks", the American raged, while the Haitian guide tried to squirm his way out of the mysterious disappearance of the corpses.

No bodies this time. I did manage to focus on an attache, who was about to be assailed by a

tangible result was that some camps were closed, the others were immediately off limits to the press. The international community remained quite passive until it saw the pictures of the lone grenade at the Sarajevo market that killed as many people at once as normally would fall in a week's time. By then, the city had already suffered the loss of ten thousand dead and wounded. Meanwhile, Sarajevo is still slowly being strangled. And now, anyone walking the streets with camera-equipment is likable to be mocked and scorned. How very different from the beginning of the siege of Sarajevo, when reporters were hailed as the vanguard of the international liberating forces. Yet after 30 months, the victims have become more realistic than the brutes. Sticks and stones are hurled at photographers doing their work at funerals. At a MsF – Doctors without Borders – party in Sarajevo a local hissed at me why the press didn't pack their bags "so we can die in dignity without outsiders".

When you haven't been obstructed by the brutes and victims, the climate and the stress, back home, you'll get backstabbed by a fifth column of critics who attempt to sow the seeds of doubt in our hearts and minds by questioning the relevance of our work. They ask questions – they just love the 'why'-question – to which we have no answers. It's strange that other photographers – especially those working in fashion and publicity who create illusions and lies – never have to justify their work for this tribunal of well-thinking intellectuals.

Yet in us, they suspect either pathological voyeurs with a morbid deathwish or moral 'übersensiblen' who -- beyond fear – do not hesitate to risk their lives in order to expose global injustice. Or even worse, we're being pestered with the question 'to what extent is a pressphoto allowed to have an aesthetic value?' Even the notion of 'to be allowed' is extremely vague. Allowed by who? And what's the sanction if we don't conform? Perhaps excommunication from the community of the morally correct? Wow. How sad.

Most 'disorder photographers' are quite unpretentious about their work and the impact it might have. As hardworking and patient clerks, they merely make an inventory of all possible human suffering. Ungrateful monkish work indeed, for the encyclopedia of la Misere du Monde continuously requires supplements, updates that future generations will uneasily skim through and lay aside. And then again, only art historians have this preoccupation with aesthetics. Photographers simply mess around and sometimes it looks good.

1994 was the Year of the Vulture. For those who had missed the Rwanda massacres (most of the press was covering Mandela's election at that time) the cholera epidemic came as a sound alternative. Those who had missed the relief flights to Goma, decided to report at least on the mental anguish of the Goma veterans. Like second generation parasites, vultures devouring vultures, they harassed poor reporters with that 'what-went-on-inside-your-

crowd. Through the viewfinder I saw his frightened and begging eyes staring straight at me. The killer had turned victim. I was still thinking what to do (something or nothing) when the Americans arrived in their jeeps and rescued the attache from his attackers. The crowd roared, the attache was put in the jeep, got hit in the jaw by yet another brick. The Americans took care of his wounds and drove him away.

Nigel also wandered around in Haïti that time, but I missed him. He'd left two days before Aristide's return. No longer he could put up with his colleagues and was already in Bosnia.

Epilogue January 1999

In 1994 I wrote this introductory essay after frequently hopping from one hot spot to the other – Sarajevo, Rwanda, Haïti – were among some of them. I have not much to add to the remarks I put down in 'Neo-Vulturism etc.' The invasion of the press in Goma and the same hacks I met a month later in Port-au-Prince gave me an eerie feeling of superfluity. I decided to focus on other subjects.

In the tunnels of New York, I encountered traces of humanity. The deeper the darkness, the more those traces will light up. Later, I went out in search of such traces in the so-called 'Forgotten Wars', the conflicts in Colombia, Afghanistan, Sudan and Sierra Leone. They are not totally forgotten: Every once in a while, hostilities will flare up in those countries and for a few days they get international media attention. 'Everybody will get his ten minutes of fame' Andy Warhol said. Unwillingly, I had my share of fame when I got in trouble in Sierra Leone. Thank God I survived. A friend and colleague did not: BBC-reporter Eddy Smith, the guy I think who saved my life, was shot death when the ECOMOG convoy he travelled with was ambushed by rebels. Light-traces in the dark.

Quite often I'm asked why I do this work. It is an understandable but tiresome question because it has been asked too much. Even the rebels in Sierra Leone asked me the 'why-question'. With their finger on the trigger, but still, even they were curious. Of course there are a lot of reasons. Reasons which occupy various positions on a moral continuum somewhere between the extremes of opportunism and altruism. I think the Alpinist gave the best answer.

Teun Voeten