Are you a vulture?
Reflecting on the ethics and aesthetics of atrocity coverage and its aftermath

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Introduction

How do journalists, photographers, documentary filmmakers and editors exercise judgements about what kind of images to capture, commission, solicit and publish or broadcast in the aftermath of atrocity? What are the ethical and aesthetic responsibilities that attend documentary work which seeks to witness and record, hand-in-hand with contributors? These issues deliver a third, less discussed question which is the focus of this chapter: what are the intentions and responses of practitioners who file video, photography and words from such extreme situations?

To unpack some of this, it may help to clear the way by clarifying what is not being attempted. Discussions of atrocity coverage often flower into passions.
nate debates seeking to locate or refute bias. Decisions that configure what kind of violence is shown can reflect the highly politicised charge of terrible events. Journalists such as Martin Bell have sought to question the universalising claims of news values to reveal their own specificity, for example in his discussion of the “journalism of attachment” (1996).

I am not attempting the essential examination of whether a given conflict is covered “objectively” or the valuable debate of whether people, especially in richer, Western societies, are insulated from fuller engagement with reality by sanitised news values. I focus, rather, on detailed questions of how coverage is achieved: in particular, the approaches of visual practitioners (photographers, documentary makers, journalists), especially those who develop abiding connections with their subjects in their coverage of atrocity and have the decency to be troubled by the attempt.

Concentrating on these questions and practitioners’ individual responses (my own included) may raise some useful objections. This choice does not seek to dismiss an important critique of the bourgeois emphasis on the individual nor to discount the idea that an author has little control over how meaning is received by audiences as the work circulates. Such objections can be held alongside the individual experience from which stories are fashioned and beg a fuller discussion elsewhere. James Nachtwey, considered by many to be the pre-eminent “frontline” photojournalist, writes:

No matter how overwhelming an event, what happens to people at ground level happens to them individually, and photography has a unique ability to portray events from their point of view (Nachtwey 2009: 5).

Whichever viewpoints are assumed, it is valuable to ask whether graphic images of suffering, war and atrocity are necessarily exploitative. To navigate such a treacherous and valuable phrase, specific practitioners’ reflections are examined in order to expose ethical decisions and reach, not a resolution but an engagement with the persistent questions that covering atrocity and its aftermath should pose.

**Practitioners’ perspectives**

Is atrocity coverage necessarily exploitative? To know of terrible events is one of the conditions of moving towards a response that could encourage a path away from atrocity as part of the conditions for peace. George Rodger, the much-admired
photographer and co-founder of the Magnum Photographic Agency, says of his work at Bergen-Belsen:

I photographed the dead. I had to. Well, that was something that the world absolutely had to know about and they could only know about it through pictures. So I took the pictures (Rodger 1987).

But how do we know what we do about Bergen-Belsen from Rodger’s work? Which practitioner choices – of subjects, framing and composition, angle and analysis – enable paths of identification and understanding? Individual stories and images, their context and framing, imply an analysis even if this is only revealed – or betrayed – “against the grain” of their intention. What are often missing from discussions of such work, however, are practitioners’ critical perspectives. How practitioners understand their experience can inform and refine the ethical debate, especially when they are faced with extreme events.

A willingness to acknowledge the role of a practitioner’s subjectivity can help expose ethical concerns in the detail of uncomfortable and awkward self-questioning. What are the perceived needs of the story compared to the needs of interviewees or subjects of the story, who are the most important people in the documentary process? This is rarely a neat exchange, since the practitioner’s work may well highlight tensions between the perceived demands of a story and a subject’s sensibility.

However, such an emphasis on self-questioning runs counter to a culture of journalism that prides itself on a naturalised “common-sense” response in exercising news judgements; which prefers to see not a story but “the story” as something “self-evident” rather than constructed. This is a delicate area. At the same time, the preoccupation with practitioner subjectivity invites an important critique of how documentary can become over-determined with the playing out of the practitioner’s process rather than the reality of another.

I concentrate in what follows on practitioner experiences, but parallel questions are troubling audiences who are now, as Susan Sontag writes, increasingly “spectator[s] of calamites”:

Wars are now also living room sights and sounds. Information about what is happening elsewhere, called “news”, features conflict and violence. “If it bleeds it leads” runs the venerable guideline of tabloids and twenty-four-hour headline news shows – to which the response is compassion, or indignation, or titillation, or approval, as each misery heaves into view (Sontag 2003: 18).
Questions of what visual journalism is made from conflict are increasingly relevant to practitioners and audiences alike. In the age of the blog and citizen journalism, a new world of audiences cross a threshold of interactivity to become producers as well as consumers (Beckett 2008) with motives which range (echoing Sontag’s responses) from circulating such imagery in “mash-up infotainment” in the blogosphere to creating activist-led story-telling agitating for change.

The role of reflection in research

Anne Aghion is an Emmy-award winning French-American documentary-maker who completed her documentary film trilogy on the Rwandan justice and reconstruction process in 2009, visiting Rwanda more than twenty times across eight years. With her commitment to long-form documentary projects in Rwanda, Aghion argues for the importance of reflection in shaping how work is made and how the vectors of ideas emerge from impulse and interaction with the culture:

Before I even started to film anything I went to Rwanda on several occasions, for several weeks each time. I needed to find a balance between the filmmaking process, which is a combination of urgency and bullying, and patience – an ability to wait for the events to unfold. I needed to take time, both for my sake and for the sake of those I was trying to understand. Taking time marks the respect that we are able to give the world…

I am slow … I find it far more interesting to reflect on how you live “after” – in reflection on reflection – than to examine the details of survival itself. Crisis is very painful, but what we need to know more about is how to live after the crisis, or in a crisis of a more enduring kind (Aghion 2009: 42).

Donald Schön’s seminal exploration of professional life, *The reflective practitioner* (1983), brings reflection to the centre of analysing professional practice emphasised by Aghion. This approach is significantly taken up in journalism studies by Machin and Niblock (2006). Schön makes a key distinction between reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Reflection-in-action is discussed as being akin to “thinking on your feet” (Schön op cit: 68) and is interested in practitioners’ moments of confusion, puzzlement and surprise. Reflection-on-action includes discussions with colleagues (Machin and Niblock op cit: 45) that can lead to significant developments in professional practice.
Both approaches can help in sifting ethical and aesthetic decisions, revisiting location experience to help inform and refine responses. In my photographic and directing work, I have benefited from thinking about practitioners’ choices and their justification. Ambiguous situations mean that there are no foolproof reflexes and there have been difficult judgements for me to make about how to film sequences in a Sudanese refugee camp, during the Sierra Leone civil war and in producing a photographic essay following a series of murders in India.

**Murder in Khairlanji**

My main case study is a sequence of images taken in Khairlanji, a small village in the central Indian state of Maharashtra, India, where a series of murders were planned and carried out to punish a so-called “untouchable” or “Dalit” family for their increasing success. The motive for the murders was the refusal of a Dalit family, the Bhotmanges, to tolerate an attempted land-grab by higher caste Hindus. Such extreme violence was informed by the changing social status of the Bhotmange family, one of a handful of Dalit families whose success in their village of 178 households was evidenced by the new confidence of their eldest daughter Priyanka Bhotmange who topped the class at secondary school, won a local award and was clearly on her way out of the shadows of caste constrictions.

It is worth noting that caste discrimination and the practice of “untouchability” were outlawed in the Indian constitution, adopted by the newly independent nation in 1949. The great Dalit leader, Dr B. R. Ambedkar, as India’s first law minister, framed the new Indian constitution, but caste discrimination persists and these murders provide evidence of a horrifying extreme of routine prejudice, an abiding disfigurement of Indian society and culture.

**Personal experience**

To help reflect on and clarify my own intentions and responses, I keep field notes. These are normally private but the following quotes aim to open out a process to see if critical reflection can help crystallise questions of documentary contact. The following notes were made in an intense two-day period in December 2007 when photographing the aftermath of a series of caste-based murders and are...
based on access negotiated with activists agitating for a trial of the murderers. When researching the story I worked with a local doctor who invited me to his home for tea [see Plate 1, www.lotusfilms.co.uk, photography tab ‘Remembering Khairlanji’]:

A local doctor, translating in Marathi for me, suddenly produced photographs, flashing broken and leaking bodies across a laptop that left me grappling — not knowing how to respond — wondering how much to show of “reality” yet honour the memory of people so dehumanised that such violence was possible (Rughani 2007).

I spent the day with the one surviving family member, Bhyyalal Bhotmange to do some photography with him. He has a bodyguard and needs protection since his living presence has become a rallying point in the fight for a fair trial.

For some time I hadn’t taken the camera out of my bag. I’m waiting until it feels right — is it intrusive? — am I planning some kind of theft? He must expect me to have a camera but I don’t want to initiate. As we talk of his loss, part of my mind is clocking light sources and possible angles (ibid).

In those moments I remember twin impulses: seeking empathic connection with Bhyyalal, the sole survivor of this murdered family, at the same time knowing that I needed to leave with publishable material. My eyes engaged his, but part of my mind was already filtering the location for ways to look at him. How do aesthetic considerations play out in such situations? It felt like impertinence to notice how this train of thought had already reached its destination. I thought that seeing the location of the murders was important but was wary of suggesting it.

I’m relieved that he’s suggested going to the village where his family were killed. I feel compelled to see where this happened; to stand with him in this place.

We arrive in Khairlanji and visit his home where his wife, sons and daughter were assaulted, beaten, sexually abused, murdered and dumped in a neighbouring canal. It was a theatrical series of murders — designed to send the strongest signal to “low caste” people not to challenge high-caste power. I wonder: should I write more of the grisly detail to bring out some of these horrors? When is silence worse? But how to do this without further degrading what’s left? (ibid).

This final question continues to circle around me here in London, stalking my memory of Khairlanji. What is the tension between striving to convey the weight and horror of such atrocities on the one hand and the risk of cheapening and sensationalising these events, for example, by the casual distribution of graphic stories and imagery in a commodified culture of “infotainment”?
Ethics and aesthetics

We pushed back the wooden doors from the field, stepping into the skeletal frame of this terrible place (ibid) [see Plate 2].

I followed Bhayyalal into the family home. Choices about frame sizes and lenses became more and more “automatic”. It was a wordless time where my body moved intuitively, trying to be alive to Bhayyalal’s emotional “temperature”. No words in the sight of the unspeakable. At a muffled distance the rhythm of village life at sunset; bullock carts clattering their return … picture-book yellow-orange light leaking under Bhayyalal’s broken door.

There are times when the camera is like a telescope – drawing you in to close-up detail, connecting you with the subjects. Other times it’s like a fence, separating – numbing (in this sense the camera delivers a kind of anaesthetic). Is this a necessary distance in order to function?

Sometimes these twin moments are alive in the mind, heart and hands simultaneously. Elucidating and pulling away from…

In the few minutes we were allowed in to the house, by the shrine I found myself putting the camera down; wanting to pay respects. Needing to absorb these realities in order to find some kind of photographic response (ibid).

A way of visualising takes shape. For Anne Aghion in Rwanda, an aesthetic evolved which centres on recovering the dignity of victims, developed in partnership with Rwandan cameraman James Kakwerere:

The more emotional things are, the less you want to be framing in close-up. If you do that, it becomes voyeuristic and I don’t think it’s necessary – we’re talking filming at a reasonable distance and you can get the emotion without being close.

What’s being said is sometimes so powerful that you don’t need to go in tighter (Aghion, in an interview with the author).

Aghion uses mid and wide shots extensively. For her the tight close-up is an invasion: an idea that runs counter to mainstream norms, especially in the US broadcast sector. Andi Gitow, an experienced United Nations television producer in New York and former network news producer at NBC, is also a psychology expert in post-traumatic stress disorder. She says:

I don’t agree with staying wide as a rule. When someone talks I want to see the subtleties, especially what isn’t verbalised – responses of their eyes and facial muscles.
Shot sizes are critical for the network. Anything emotional: go in tight – start mid-shot, go in tighter – the cameraman and I develop signals to just go shoulders up and ease in tightly (Gitow, in an interview with the author).

Both Gitow and Aghion have spent many years producing extended explorations of the aftermath of trauma and reach contrasting conclusions. Aghion’s experience has led her to turn away from the journalistic convention of the close-up:

I know every manipulative trick that’s used – to zoom in on someone’s pained expression but I don’t think the answer is to do that.

Editing is full of music and montages and in the context of that kind of editing you’re manipulating people’s emotional responses and in the end that takes away the power. This is where a lot of the editorial questions come in – to go in tight is pornographic and exploitative (Aghion, in an interview with the author).

There’s a structural difference between directing a camera crew where shot sizes are more often discussed between director and camera person (even if the style is agreed in advance) and the dynamic of being a single person operator, taking still photographs or writing a story. In the still photographic work in Khairlanji, responses emerge unspoken as consciousness responds to the environment, making a series of decisions that move the hands and eye [see Plate 3].

Sometimes the camera remains a barrier between you and what’s inside the frame; this mutual regard is punctuated by the trip of the shutter. Quite how these competing directions unfold depends on many things, not always visible to me in that moment. To stop and think much at the time is hard. You need still to function within a small window of time and yet how one does this depends on what’s gone before, the rush of one’s life delivering this current moment. Somehow the best thing to do is to let the impact happen and allow it to shape the act of looking (Rughani 2007).

In these moments a wide spectrum of reactions unfurl, from anger to horror, pity to empathy, sorrow and even irrational guilt. A blend of all this and more. Concurrently. Often not fully consciously. Close attention to the cross-currents of emotion and intellect can lead the practitioner towards insistent questioning of individual motive and response – a scintilla of feeling – or eruption of emotion. Although uncomfortable all these may hold clues for the ethics of documentary practice.

I find I’m holding my throat. Involuntarily. Mr Bhotmange is suddenly in front of me, walking the charred floor.
He’s trying to tidy the place up a bit – fix the garden – as though we were expecting someone might drop in for tea. He’s trying to tidy the place up – is there a madness to this ‘normality’ given what happened here?

By the end of the day, we’ve seen many locations where the violence unfolded. Someone asks me what I’m thinking. I must look distracted even though my hands are preoccupied with rhythm of camerawork; checking contrast in the failing light and finding compositions through fractured inner conversation. Shards of ideas. Then the quiet. Just responding. I have the comfort of a purpose here or at least its illusion. I can see Nachtwey in my head, just as he’s being asked: “What kind of a vulture are you? Preying on others? Making your shots from the disasters of others?” It’s a harsh and tender, precisely aimed and necessary question; one that visitors and viewers should be decently troubled by (Rughani 2007).

Reflecting on these notes now, I am aware of different processes at work on location. Filming can connect and alienate. For Andi Gitow there are moments where she and her team have held back at the last moment when an inner voice compels her:

At what point do you stop an interview? The longer the interview goes on the more their defences are down. But sometimes you have to ask whether you would rather walk away with this compelling TV moment but at the cost of your integrity and most importantly the emotional health of your interviewee? (Gitow, in an interview with the author).

The experience of a stills camera in my hand seemed to echo this, sometimes elucidating and drawing me in [see Plate 4] sometimes distancing and forming a physical barrier between my face and Bhayyalal’s. Progress in gathering imagery was, therefore, unpredictable, emerging through the primacy of developing sensitivity to Bhayyalal. This process is no science and relates strongly to empathic resonance, individual history and personal sensibility, in relation to the unique events that generate story.

Attention to persistent internal and external pressures, however, carries a danger of over-emphasis on the practitioner’s view. Photographer-academic Paul Lowe argues that the practitioner’s position is difficult because it often bears unreasonable expectations:

Typically the practitioner feels that the event is important and should be witnessed, documented and evidence. It’s especially hard for freelances because you’ve made a personal decision to go and most people feel that bearing witness has a consequentialist outcome – i.e. the hope that this won’t happen again…

But too much is expected of the film or the photograph; soon the debate shifts from the event to the representation of the event – the critique – why didn’t the photographer intervene rather than why didn’t the world intervene?
It’s “shoot the messenger” (Lowe, in an interview with the author).

The “consequentialist” assumption is at the heart of the work of the human rights activist group Witness (www.witness.org). Their slogan encapsulates this emphasis: “See it, film it, change it”. Sam Gregory is programme director and draws heavily on video activism and citizen journalism as a way to circulate stories of human rights abuses:

A report like Dual injustice, about a murder in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, is our ultimate ethical video because it looks at police failings and the systematic murder of women and the use of torture. We then use this individual story to press for policy change (Gregory, in an interview with the author).

A campaigning organisation’s position crosses the line from notions of “objective” to “committed” reportage, but the ethics of the use of graphic imagery persists, to be uncovered anew in each situation. Some practitioners (and I’ve found myself responding in this way) seek a way to gesture towards events more metaphorically [see Plate 5].

Is symbol and suggestion the key in documentary photography of atrocity? When faced with suffering on a grand or even epic scale, how is it possible to look too directly or even literally at these too-frequent events? It’s like trying to look into the sun (Rughani 2007).

**The vulture question**

In the documentary film War photographer, James Nachtwey is asked: “Are you a vulture?” For George Rodger at Bergen-Belsen, the question did not come from an interviewer:

I’d be talking to somebody, a prisoner there. It actually did happen. Cultured man. He was so happy to be liberated and he’d been a long time in the camp and in the middle of a sentence he suddenly fell down dead ... I actually photographed him. To my absolute horror I found I was getting the dead into photographic compositions to make good pictures and I thought “My God, I’m getting as though this doesn’t mean anything to me” and I couldn’t accept this – such absolute horror really didn’t affect me as much as it should. And so I decided then and there that I was going to quit. I’m not going to take another picture and I just felt it was the end for me. I couldn’t take any more (Rodger, speaking in A life in photography, 1987).

The question “Are you a vulture?” gestures towards a philosophical hinterland where journalism ethics are linked to broader issues of moral philosophy. Mapping
the philosophical positions alone would consume too much space here, but I want briefly acknowledge a defence made by Kevin Carter who won a Pulitzer Prize in 1994 for his picture of a starving Sudanese girl in *The New York Times* (23 March 1993). Asked about taking his shot and leaving (in other words, not helping the girl he photographed, who lies slumped whilst a vulture waits), Carter argued for the position of the journalist as observer.⁵

Luc Bovens identifies contradictory motives among practitioners in conflict zones, evidencing the significant violations of dignity and privacy which are implied in the creation and circulation of graphic imagery. This leaves a trace.

A morally decent person takes on a certain amount of responsibility for the unforeseen consequences of his actions and does not devote all his energy exculpating himself (Bovens 1998: 208).

**Editorial guidelines and practitioner experience**

A range of editorial guidelines suggest that a balance is to be struck between the perceived needs of journalists and audiences to be informed and subjects’ sensibilities. The BBC’s editorial guidelines on *War, terror and emergencies* state:

> We should respect human dignity without sanitising the realities of war. There must be clear editorial justification for the use of very graphic pictures of war or atrocity.⁶

The BBC’s statement on *How to deal with a serious incident in a live broadcast* adds that practitioners should:

> …balance the public interest in full and accurate reporting against the need to be compassionate and to avoid any unjustified infringement of privacy. It is rarely justified to broadcast scenes in which people are dying. It is always important to respect the privacy and dignity of the dead. We should avoid the gratuitous use of close ups of faces and serious injuries or other violent material.⁷

Such guidelines are variously interpreted depending on context, audience, perceived political climate and cultural norms. Greg Dyke, as Director General of the BBC, described how in 2003 Jana Bennett, the BBC’s Director of Television deputising for Dyke on holiday, favoured the view that:

> We should include pictures of dead British soldiers in Iraq in a documentary made for BBC Two’s *Correspondent* series… I tended to agree but it wasn’t an easy call… When the BBC’s Governors’ complaints committee considered the
issue a couple of months later they took the view that we’d made the wrong decision and should not have broadcast the pictures (Dyke 2004: 250–1).

Strong criticism of the broadcast followed from the *Sun* newspaper, backed by families of some of the dead soldiers. The charge of sensationalism and insensitivity from the *Sun*, however, is not applied to coverage of fatalities caused by British military action. Does the *Sun’s* concern betray a fear that radical questioning may follow if a fuller picture of war emerges? James Nachtwey argues:

If everyone could be there just once to see for themselves what white phosphorous does to the face of a child or what unspeakable pain is caused by the impact of a single bullet or how a jagged piece of shrapnel can rip someone’s leg off – if everyone could be there to see for themselves the fear and the grief, just one time, then they would understand that nothing is worth letting things get to the point where that happens to even one person, let alone thousands (Nachtwey op cit).

To conclude with questions

At one end of the scale, perhaps due to bad luck, judgement or moral sensibility, some have been burned by their experience and simply stopped producing stories and images from conflict, feeling that this is the last response open to them. For George Rodger, one corner of his consciousness arrested another. In the Kevin Carter case quoted earlier of the vulture and the child, a sparkling career ended when he committed suicide in July 1994 within a few months of his Pulitzer Prize. Although it is unclear what impact his reflections on these photographs had on him, such extremes highlight the dangers of the territory. Other responses from leading practitioners who continue to work with image and text suggest a close attention to their personal motives and beliefs. James Nachtwey says:

The worst thing is to feel that as a photographer I am benefiting from someone else’s tragedy. This idea haunts me. It’s something I have to reckon with every day because I know that if I ever allowed genuine compassion to be overtaken by personal ambition, I will have sold my soul. The only way I can justify my role is to have respect for the other person’s predicament. The extent to which I do that is the extent to which I become accepted by the other; and to that extent, I can accept myself (ibid).

Fergal Keane, the Irish writer and broadcaster who was for many years the BBC’s correspondent in South Africa, adds:
The key thing to remember… is that it is possible in the midst of tragedy and sorrow (and we witness a great deal of that) to believe in a kind of hopeful future. Now Rwanda challenged that for me. Edward Behr, who went right through the Second World War, who went through Algeria, Congo and Vietnam, he managed to hold on to a fundamental optimism about human beings and I still do. You’d go mad if you took the other route.8

How possible is it to emerge from these situations and piece together stories and images that do not further damage the dignity of people who have been violated? Here are some key questions that could provide necessary guidance, distilled from field notes and research:

- Am I clear enough about my own intentions and motives and the motives of those who may seek to be featured? What do victims of atrocity want others to know?
- What impact might involvement with the project have on the subjects featured?
- Can the representation and framing of subjects help subjects recover their dignity?
- How aware am I of the sensitivities of subjects and audience?
- What are my instincts telling me?
- Is there a way to do more than trade in misery and inhumanity? Are there even moments of renewal or empowerment?

I have tried to open out something of my own attempts to reflect on experience in order to ask what kind of working methods can practitioners live with? This is not to attempt a definition, as responses will differ for each practitioner and audience. I’m interested rather in staying open to being troubled by ethical challenges of such questions as they reconfigure through the experience of filming and photographing in the aftermath of trauma and atrocity. Through that process, attending to doubt and uncertainty, images and sentences surface as stories. The moments of shock that force them into consciousness and into the culture of media continue to trouble me – productively, I hope [see Plate 6].

Notes

1 All Aghion quotes from research interview in New York on 29 August 2009, except this one.
2 Glass houses (2004), the British Council, directed by Pratap Rughani, Lotus Films Productions.
4 The doctor is well-regarded as a reliable source but is not named here as he has been threatened.

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Poeuv, Socheata, CEO, Khmer Legacies
Page, Shepherd, Freelance documentary maker, BBC TV Training, BBC Elstree
Sutherland, Patrick, Reader in Photography, London College of Communication

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