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Beyond Photojournalism: Constraints and Contradictions in Hostile Environments

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This thesis was submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the University of Wales for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.
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DECLARATION

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

Signed ................../..&**.,..x> (candidate)

Date ............15/4/2011...........................................................

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Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references. A bibliography is appended.

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Abstract

My doctoral thesis examines the function of photography and the performance of photographers working under restricted circumstances, by focusing on the controversies they have to handle in a hostile environment. In particular, by thoroughly studying the case of North Korea I concentrate on the impacts of censorship and self-censorship and the capability of a photographer to pursue and fulfill his/her goal. Moreover, my practice-led PhD thesis incorporates an original series of my photographs from North Korea and Malaysia, which validate my main research question which concerns how context interacts with the photojournalist’s situational work.

By means of case studies of key exhibitions about North Korea, the Iraq war, photojournalism and art, I compare my work against that of widely recognized photographers, both photojournalists and art photographers, and I examine the question whether photographs still retain any meaning if their message is abstracted and obscured by disconnection and distance? Further, in juxtaposing North Korea with other contexts -hostile or not- as Iraq and Malaysia, I describe the various constraints that restrict photographers’ work.

Based on my experience as a war photographer, I examine associations between photojournalism and art photography and I treat the question whether aesthetic concerns compromise ethical or journalistic content.

My research concludes that there is a space between the two genres art and photojournalism that, without loosing its accurate political meaning and sense of responsibility, manages to combine photojournalism’s humanistic core values with a more distant aesthetic approach; this is the space that I call “Beyond Photojournalism” and where, after my shift towards aesthetics, I position my present work.
Beyond Photojournalism: Constraints and Contradictions in Hostile Environments

"I think photojournalism is documentary photography with a purpose"  
W. Eugene Smith.¹

Introduction

This PhD thesis presents the way photography functions in hostile environments and the way photographers can perform in situations of control and constraint. I hereby focus on the relation between art and photojournalism and the problems that can be encountered in attempting its clarification, by drawing from my experience as a war photographer and by examining my personal shift from photojournalism to art photography.

My aim is to examine my working hypothesis, namely, that context interacts with the photojournalist's situational work in the case study of North Korea and the coverage of the Iraq war. With this purpose I study the environments where I have already worked in the past, and which I revisited during my PhD research, under the lens of my shift towards a more aesthetic/art-based approach, which I describe as "Beyond Photojournalism". This personal awareness and my particular passage to my new approach, attempts to bridge the gap between photojournalism and art photography.

In doing so I particularly focus on the restrictions of the North Korean environment and on how the photographer can perform when encountering with difficulties in access and with censorship. To document my need to move towards aesthetics, I present further photographic work from my recent research trip to Malaysia, which was realized for my practice-led PhD, and I correlate the latter with my new work from North Korea. The result is an

authored book and an exhibition that has emerged from out of the context of photojournalism.

Moreover, by using as case studies key exhibitions about North Korea and exhibitions about war, photojournalism and art, I compare my own work against that of widely recognized photographers, taken from both the fields of photojournalism and art photography.

More specifically, in Chapter One I attempt to provide definitions of photojournalism and to describe its values and constraints, according to both my experience and bibliographical study. Both endeavors document my belief that it might be possible to put an end to wars by using photography as a human act – human in the sense that the photographer takes a lot of risks while at the same time shares the life and suffering of those s/he photographs. The fact that history will be written by your images is probably what propels you into the dangers of the war zones. As a matter of fact, I believe the profession’s core value is about collecting evidence just like a forensic photographer would do. Then the work becomes more factual and less about “good photography”.

Photojournalism is a particular form of journalism characteristically identified by its objective, detached and neutral nature; the traditional practice requires that pictures are taken in real-life situations employing a straight, honest or unmanipulated approach. Indeed, the basic mission of a photojournalist is to take pictures to accompany a news story; its pictures attempt to capture the viewer’s attention and emotion to entice him/her to continue listening to or reading about a specific event. Given that photojournalism’s genre is linked to the environment of its subject matter, the particularities of the situation and the responsibilities of the photographer have to be adequately analyzed in terms of both social interaction issues and of the attitudes expressed by the photographer.
Photojournalism is primarily a practical form of photography, especially given the importance of maintaining the integrity of the scene. Especially when working in hostile environments like North Korea and Iraq, a photojournalist has a lot of issues to resolve (practical, organizational and theoretical) and a lot of questions to answer: How does context interact with the photojournalist's situational work? Are there different kinds of restrictions in different kinds of environments? Can the personal ethics, methods and criteria of the photographer filter out such restrictions? However, it may also be considered to be an art form in its own right. Scene composition, choices of angles and lenses all determine the impact and power of the resulting shots.

Attempting to define photojournalism's main characteristics in comparison to art photography more issues arise: Do aesthetic concerns compromise journalistic / ethical content? To what extent is a documentary photographer able to affect or even change history by merely documenting or representing it? Focusing on the coverage of the Iraq war, I discuss these issues by drawing upon the exhibitions at the Brighton Photo Biennial 2008 Memory of Fire: The War of Images and Images of War and at the Barbican Gallery (2008) on the project “On the Subject of War” where Geert van Kesteren presents his work from Why Mister, Why? (2004) and Baghdad Calling (2008).

Moreover, the issue of constraint is examined through such context of comparisons. Photojournalists abide by many of them: constraints of time, of logistics, of technology, of regimes, of commercial promotion of their work, of editing restrictions, of the ethical questions that inevitably arise whenever they are serving their profession, as for example, the morality in depicting and publishing certain scenes. It is easy to understand that more “artistic” photographic work does not need to comply with any of the above — except, maybe, the personal constraints, which still persist, and even more intensely sometimes in artistic photography, since the act of image manipulation is always filtered through ethical and political criteria, more than the “capture of
the moment" in "classic" war photography.

In this spectrum I define myself as a documentary photographer, a photojournalist with a tendency to embrace the aftermath movement. However, my work could be considered artistic, not only because it is exhibited in museums and galleries, but rather if it becomes a work of reference for next generations to become inspired.

In Chapter Two I concentrate on citizen war photography through the case study of projects by Geert Van Kesteren and Thomas Hirschhorn. In addition, I examine the ethical dimension of several questions that arise from the use of the wide spread usage of digital photos by non-professionals to capture snapshots of the war's reality: how right it is to present images of people suffering? What should be photographed, by whom and how? What does it mean to use, make or view images of conflict? What forms of picturing, for example, respect the dignity and agency of those shown? What forms assault the integrity of the spectator? What will mobilize useful action and what will, instead, exacerbate the injury? What is the weight of professionalism and how important is proximity in witnessing the event? Who is authorized to convey war photographs to the world? How much do the answers depend on the site of the encounter between image and viewer - for example, newspaper, magazine, monitor, book, or museum?

My methodology employs qualitative research and observation practices in order to record and assess my own professional experience at work. A large part of my work is descriptive, in trying to record the uniqueness of each photographic experience, without though leaving out correlations with and contrasts against the work of other photographers, as found in the relevant literature, by carrying out comparative attitudinal surveys. This way I believe I shall manage to analyze my own work as well as the work by other photographers, via personal practice and conventional case studies.
A critical aim of all questions of the chapter is to answer an even more serious one: is photojournalism conquered or transformed by digital citizenship images? Do the latter nullify photojournalism's merit or do they enforce a clarification and deepening of its key values?

Chapter Three focuses on North Korea and its photographic representations through historical retrospective exhibitions. More specifically, I examine the work of the “realists” Margaret Bourke-White, Chris Marker and Seok Imsaeng, in comparison to their aesthetic rivals Philippe Chancel, Charlie Crane and Andreas Gursky. In parallel, my own representations of North Korea provide the context for further questions, which become the vehicles for my aesthetic journey to kinds of images beyond photojournalism. Since the aim of my case study is to document my working hypothesis concerning how context interacts with the photojournalist’s situational work, it is important to see how contemporary photographers capture the images of the country and, in addition, how censorship and difficulty of access experienced in the specific regime affects their work.

By cross-examining their projects with mine I can shed new light on my own work, in the two distinct periods of my project [before and during my PhD research], thus I can actually record and document my shift to a more aesthetic or art-based approach to North Korea and see how this interacts with the difficulty of access and censorship. As a consequence of this comparison, I study more closely the main principles that these works have to comply with and the common characteristics or differences between them, since it is important to focus on the work of those photographers who have managed to depict Korean scenes through time.

I differentiate between the two categories of photographers in terms of both aesthetics and ideology and of the manner they choose to approach their subject. The first category includes the so-called “realistic” photojournalists, namely the ones who serve the journalistic point of view and thus they obey
the code of ethics imposed by their profession, acting and thinking in a rather conventional way. Margaret Bourke-White, Chris Marker and Seok Imsaeng by denying any sense of propaganda in their work and by choosing the “tough way” of classical evidence these photographers have utilized various ruses (technical and organizational) in order to achieve their goal, despite the incredible limitations that the North Korean regime imposes.

The second category introduces a rather modern version of photographic evidence, where photographers clearly choose to keep a distance from their subject, by using cumbersome and slow devices, by avoiding to come into close contact with the, anyway, remote reality, though they do emphasize its aesthetic representation. Charlie Crane, Philippe Chancel and Andreas Gursky acting on purely aesthetic criteria, in absolute compromise with the regime’s orders (or with its official permit), relieved from any controls and psychological constraints, created images of high aesthetic qualities, approaching or even surmounting the borders of propaganda material. The point with aesthetics is that although it does offer a neutral, pure and polished view, in the case of North Korea it exemplifies the absence of any kind of political irony or derision of the regime (as in the classic photojournalistic approach) while collaboration with the authorities erases any sense of objectivity. In the name of beauty and embellishment, they fall into the trap of the exotic idealized image. This image, though approved by the North Korean regime, is of the least interest to the media and photojournalists.

In Chapter Four my research concludes that there is some space between the two genres (photojournalism and art photography) that borrows elements from both, keeping the photojournalism’s critical humanistic core values while at the same time maintaining a distant aesthetic approach, thus moving towards the realms of art; this is the space where I position my personal work. Moreover, my differentiation from both categories that I define in Chapter Three is obvious in the comparison between my two projects of North Korea.
Having been working for more than 18 years in both war and peace zones, all over the world, I felt the need to evaluate what I had been doing and to move beyond photojournalism, not necessarily in order to enter into the world of art - since my photographs are already hanging on museum and galleries’ walls- but in order to reach an additional audience, which I think by itself is an important merit in documentary photography.

During my last visit in North Korea I was significantly influenced by my doctoral research and I had already started reconsidering certain opinions, which regard the utopian effort of the photographer’s “close encounter” to the event. Taking the decision, then, that physical approach was by default constrained, due to the inevitable, physical and realistic restrictions, I started digressing from the subject matter and I began rather implying what happened around me – since revealing the true facts was futile.

Finding myself at a crossroads in my photographic career in my PhD research visit, I decided to act in a more unconnected manner, searching for a sustainable form of photography after photojournalism, aiming at expressing a political commentary, without though giving up its core values for “just art”.

Having found the “techniques” to gain such distances, and searching for a far more unconfined approach, free from the physical restrictions of the hostile environment of North Korea, I decided to turn my research towards an entirely different country of South-Eastern Asia: Malaysia. Taking Asian rampant consumerism as my reference point, and as a paradox to be examined, I managed to distinguish both similarities and contradictions between these two absolutely contrasting countries.

I have now understood that when working beyond photojournalism contextual restrictions are not an issue any more – at least not to the degree that they used to be, since the purpose now is different: to express my personal (humanistic) vision, by suggesting my principles when pointing my camera, no
matter the environment. In Malaysia I had the opportunity to try all kinds of
distances, literally and metaphorically, from my subjects and to consciously
apply aesthetic criteria in my shots. Photography, thus, turned into a willing
employment rather than an imposed obligation, I am free to become
consciously concerned about gesture and intimacy, about the human
condition, about being close to human life. During this project, and in reaction
to developments within photojournalism and art based photography, my
transition from photojournalism to aesthetics seemed to me like a natural
consequence, as well as a necessary expansion of my work.
Chapter One

The Values and Constraints of Photojournalism

This chapter defines photojournalism as I have experienced and understood it through my work as a war photographer and continues by discussing photojournalism in relation to the aesthetic character of aftermath photography of war zones in Iraq and Afghanistan.

My experience documents my belief that it might be possible to put an end to wars by using photography as a human act – human in the sense that the photographer takes a lot of risks while at the same time shares the life and suffering of those s/he photographs. Ken Plummer (1983) outlines the four criteria of the humanistic method: it pays “tribute to human subjectivity and creativity showing how individuals respond to social constraints”; it deals with “concrete human experiences” through their social organisation; it shows an “intimate familiarity” with such experiences; and it is self aware of “the ultimate moral and political role in moving towards a social structure in which there is less exploitation, oppression and injustice”. All four criterias define and determine to a great extent the documentary method, still placing and keeping it under the banner of humanism and the idea of social responsibility. (Petsini, 2007 p.8).

But, why photograph war? I have to admit the addictive nature of violence and even some voyeurism inherent in the business of photojournalism; the feeling that whatever you’re bringing home is evidence of something of tremendous significance. The fact that history will be written by your images is probably what propels you into such dangerous situations. In my opinion, war photojournalists have to fight emotional obstacles such as guilt, fear (even when an ally) and shame when taking a specific shot; Why do I have to photograph this? Should I stay or should I leave? As James Natchwey comments too “Every minute I was there, I wanted to flee. I did not want to
see this. Would I cut and run or would I deal with the responsibility of being there with a camera?” (Natchwey, 2001).

I need to understand war and to make events known worldwide. That idealistic perspective gives me hope that I am not just documenting history but also helping to change it. I see documented misery as a doctor sees disease: with the aim to cure it. Making a living by selling other people’s suffering is a nightmare that haunts me every single day. There is a psychological cost, sometimes imperative.

Of course, there is risk in such attitude; especially young photojournalists may become addicted to war, as they want desperately to taste the prestige of the war correspondent label; and this is a deadly ambition. I suppose that by keeping a distance and therefore being disengaged you are less addicted to suffering. However, it is paradoxical that no matter how many images of horror you show, or in what way, spectators seem to deal with it; so, instead of making them rise and protest, you see them usually just ignore the images.

It is because I needed to understand war and to make events known worldwide and because I thought that by documenting misery I would become its doctor, I became a photojournalist in the first place. Once, photojournalism used to be a profession of the few; today, new technologies have dramatically increased the number of people who deal with a certain kind of photojournalism. Despite this, professionals are few, since it seems that it is not the risks that this job entails, but rather the constraints it has to function within, that lead young photographer to seek different kinds of career. Many years after my initial professional choices (especially now, that my work has evolved into realms I did not expect in the beginning of my career), I feel the need to define (or, better, accurately re-define) my profession.

Photojournalism is a particular form of journalism characteristically identified by its objective, detached and neutral nature, which creates pictures in order
to narrate a news story. Photojournalism's traditional practice requires that pictures are taken in real-life situations employing a straight, honest or unmanipulated approach. As David Hurn suggests 'The word “photojournalism” implies that the subject of the picture is a topical news event, accompanied by words, published in the mass media, usually with the intent to right a social wrong.' (Hurn and Jay, 2001 p.13).

Most of my editorial work is reproduced in magazines by means of which it reaches a global audience. Therefore, my printed pictures seem to function like the visual equivalent of words on a page. But editorial display is just one small area where a photograph is expected to circulate as a response to real events. It is frequently argued that the photojournalist is associated with a 'foot-in-the-door, camera-in-the-face, aggression' (ibid, p.25); in this view, I believe the profession's core value is about collecting evidence just like a forensic photographer would do. Then the work becomes more factual and less about "good photography". As Magnum photographer Gilles Peress states, in relation to his work in... 'I'm gathering evidence for history, so that we remember.' (Peress, 1997).

Another, more practical and functioning, definition of the term is provided by Donald Morrison: 'Photojournalism is an untidy collision of art, reportage and commercial publishing.' (Morrison, 1990; cited in Lacayo and Russell, 1990 p.6).

All the above definitions are valid, in my opinion. Indeed, photojournalism is a timely and relatively objective kind of photography, very often dedicated to narrating a story in response to real events. Indeed, the basic mission of a photojournalist is to take pictures to accompany a news story; its pictures attempt to capture the viewer's attention and emotion to entice him/her to continue listening to or reading about a specific event.

Photojournalism is primarily a practical form of photography, especially given
the importance of maintaining the integrity of the scene. However, it may also be considered to be an art form in its own right.

Changes in political orthodoxy and media ownership have a highly detrimental effect on photojournalism, to the extent that some photographers and critics have predicted its demise (Squiers, 1996 p.54). Their concern is not only with simple exclusion but with newspapers' and magazines' control in editing, selecting and presenting images so as to stress the spectacular at the expense of the critical (Ritchin, 1990c p.110). Although it has been regularly used for conservative ends, photojournalism is rooted in radical political and cultural movements and was always, therefore, a suspect practice. Any suspicions that the elite might have harbored about photojournalism were confirmed in its important role in turning US public opinion against the Vietnam War. While this could only occur given the collusion of certain elements in the mass media, it set a dangerous precedent. In 1992 the Vietnam war photographer, Don McCullin complained that it is no longer possible to get serious work published (and indeed his international reputation did not prevent him being sacked from the *Sunday Times* after Rupert Murdoch took over, since the new regime demanded 'no more starving Third World babies; more successful businessmen around their weekend barbecues.') (McCullin and Chester, 1992 p.268).

Essentially, the ethical approaches to objectivity for photojournalists are the one applied by other journalists. At the same time, selecting what to shoot, deciding how to frame and how to edit a subject are constant considerations of the photojournalist; indeed, this is how and when s/he starts becoming the narrator of a story. Moreover, a key aspect of photojournalism is to present accurate pictures that don't compromise the integrity of the actual situation. Thus, altering pictures with computer software is never a choice among serious photojournalists and news organizations. This code of ethics is one of

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2 The founders of Magnum, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Robert Capa and David Seymour ('Chim') all worked on *Ce Soir*, the communist daily edited by Aragon.
the central features of photojournalism that distinguishes it from other areas of photography (NPPA, 2011).

Digital photography has offered many new means and instruments to the photographer, many new opportunities for the manipulation, reproduction, and transmission of images. This has inevitably complicated many of the ethical issues involved. At the same time, this has given the chance for the emergence of more “artistic” photojournalist work, since now, besides the capture of reality as such, a narrator-photojournalist is also seriously concerned about the purely aesthetic dimension of his/her work. This has marked a really fascinating shift in the profession.

Starting in the 1980s, more and more art galleries have displayed photojournalism, thus lending it more esteem as an art form. Every now and then a photographer or a curator chooses to isolate single pictures out from their original context and display them in a gallery or a museum, as images of lasting emotional and aesthetic power.

There are many constraints that a photojournalist has to abide by. First of all time constraints, since everything should take place fast: both the events and their capture; then there are the technical/logistics constraints: journeys, geography, weight limitations, etc., restrict the options of a photojournalist; thirdly, there are always the editor’s constraints, either ethical or aesthetic ones (for example, there are cases where manipulation of photographs is imposed by editor’s orders or, even worse, is implemented by digital after-treatment with or without the participation of the photographer); also there are commercial constraints, since, especially in printed media, war photographies have sometimes to compete with page long advertising; we cannot of course forget contextual constraints, with restrictions imposed by totalitarian regimes being the most difficult one to overcome; last but not least there are personal constraints, in terms of, for example, the very act of depicting certain scenes.
Thus, many times I have a strong sense of relief when, after a hard working day, I submit my pictures to my agency, knowing that I am no longer responsible for their fate, as if my mission has just been completed. One might argue that the better photojournalists combine the creativity and technical skills of the artist and the artisan, all the while working within an alienated situation comparable to that of the industrial worker. As David Levi Strauss wrote about the work of Richard Cross and John Hoagland, distinguished U.S. photojournalists, who were killed in El Salvador, 'They did not own the pictures they made any more than a worker in a munitions factory owns the weapons he makes while employed' (2005 p.44).

1.1 Aftermath art photography

Certain war photographers, however, have a totally different attitude. They choose to work freely, without the constraints that discipline my own work, they select aesthetic criteria over the (ethically responsible, in my own opinion) rule of approaching real events in a more neutral and objective yet humane way.

As Erina Duganne notes in her essay Photography After the Fact (2007) some contemporary photographers have gone beyond their reliance on the lightweight, 35mm or digital handheld camera with its ostensible ability to freeze events quickly. Instead, they have turned to medium- or large-format cameras, the larger frames and sizes of which require a slower process and produce more detailed images of what comes “after”. In his Desert Stories or Faith in Facts? (1995, p.240), lan Walker used the term "post-reportage" to define this shift in photography: 'I use that term "post-reportage" to suggest not what photography cannot do, but what it can: document what comes after, what has been left when the war is over.' David Campany reiterated this observation: ‘Whatever its indexical primary, photography is now a secondary medium of evidence.... the eclipse of the reality reportage of “events” and the emergence of photography of the trace or “aftermath”’ (2003, p.27).
It is easy to understand that more "artistic" photographic work does not need to comply with any of the constraints described in the paragraphs above: time is not an issue - or it can be prolonged in the dark room; technology can offer its full spectrum of possibilities for the image creator; editor-free portfolios have to obey only the photographer's points of view; media-imposed commercial constraints do not exist; context is not an issue, especially in the so-called aftermath photography; only personal constraints still persist, and even more intensely sometimes in artistic photography, since the act of image manipulation is always filtered through ethical and political criteria, more than the "capture of the moment" in "classic" war photography.

So, one might say that the lifting of such constraints is the emancipation of a photojournalist, the way to his/her "elevation" to a more sublime realm of depiction of a narration; in fact, this is what the aesthetic approach does: it creates a creator, an artist out of a professional photojournalist, by giving him/her the opportunity to get control over his/her work. These are the constraints that Paul Seawright and Simon Norfolk are not obliged to obey.

Representation of war by contemporary art photographers was the subject of The Sublime Image of Destruction a Brighton Photo Biennial 2008 exhibition in De La Warr Pavilion at Bexhill\(^3\). War photography marked all exhibitions in the rest of the Biennial, with wide-ranging content: old and new pictures, museum art and photojournalism, amateur and professional photographs presented side by side (Campbell, 2009, p.65).

Certainly, the mere fact that photojournalists have entered the museums, with these "meta-images" of theirs, may insinuate that these works have ceased being works of journalism but they have been now made works of art. Isn't art shown in museums, after all? So, is there a deep modification taking place

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\(^3\) The Sublime Image of Destruction exhibition in Bexhill was part of the Brighton Photo Biennial 2008, Memory of Fire: The War of Images and Images of War, Oct-Nov 2008.
here, in these kind of images? Has the focus shifted from “depiction” towards “representation”? Are current photo-galleries the cradles of a new art form? If this is so, is it right to judge these images with the terms and the criteria of the good-old-real photojournalism, as we used to know it? What are the borders between the real photojournalism and the aftermath type?

Indeed, it is not difficult to understand, given all the circumstances laid out here, why such kind of photojournalism (the “aftermath” type – without, though, criticizing its artistic value, if any) is generally encountered with suspicion worldwide. Skeptism about the “truth” of such “reality tokens” is based on the fact that it is no secret any more that both the news organizations and the states and militaries are handling the coverage of international conflicts the way they want. People see pictures that are highly manufactured, in many ways. ‘The ease and speed with which digital photography can be altered (along with a few well-publicised examples of photojournalists doing just that), and awareness of the extent to which meaning can be manipulated by selective framing, produces in many viewers deep distrust’ (Stallabrass, 2008a, p.9).

Julian Stallabrass (2008c p.8), the curator of the Brighton Photo Biennial, believes that photojournalism can be matched against museum photography, amateur photography against professional, and artists’ use of photography in installation against the place of news photographs in blogs. Since photojournalism remains bound to newspaper or magazine pages, its photographers necessarily and automatically "capture" the real without any self-reflexivity or critical detachment. Artists, on the other hand, due to the self-sufficiency and distance of their images from the real, can think about the nature of representation and its depiction of reality in a more oblique and, hence, contemplative manner.

According to Stallabrass (2008b), the lines between the genres of photojournalism and artistic photography ‘are a bit blurry. The clearest
examples of museum photography we’re showing is work by Simon Norfolk, Paul Seawright (see figure 1), and Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, all of which is included in an exhibition looking in part at the genre of aftermath photography made with [medium or] large format cameras.’ In fact, the success of this genre of museum photography over the last 10-15 years is very striking.

In particular, the work of Paul Seawright and Simon Norfolk is not war photography as we know it. Their work is highly aestheticised; they prefer to depict the concept of abstraction over the irrationality of war, the surreality of depopulated landscapes over the vulgar gun-shot faces of the dead. As Helen James observes: ‘In many ways, the images by these photographers are closer to the medium of landscape photography than they are to the documentation of war’ (James, 2008 p.12).
These images, from the lyrical and painterly images of Simon Norfolk (2003) to the quieter and bleaker photographs of mine fields and ruins in Afghanistan by Paul Seawright, (2003), stand in contrast to photojournalism, through a practice that claims to be more resolved and intellectual than the news-driven work of photojournalists. They also examine representation itself, as in Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin’s pictures (2007) of the Israeli training grounds of urban destruction, and the imagined national landscape of surveillance, order and control.

Like other museum photography, images in this genre relate to the tradition of painting, by becoming registers of the destruction of war (see figure 2). At the same time, the use of large cameras encourages disengagement, stateliness and distance, literal and sometimes emotional, from the subject.
Indeed, defining photojournalism as art does raise some problems for the standing ethics of photojournalism. While photojournalism denies image manipulation, does this restriction apply in its artistic form? If photojournalistic images are manipulated in the name of art, will people be equally willing to trust the images they see in newspapers and magazines? (James, 2008 p.13).

Today, war photography in the museum has turned into a medium of the aftermath. This is because the technological nature of today's warfare has resulted in a war that is nearly impossible to document as it happens. Surveying sites ruined by war and catastrophe—Bosnia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Kuwait, Beirut, Baghdad, Lebanon or Palestine—photographers such as Simon Norfolk and Paul Seawright have developed this strange new genre: employing saturated or subdued color, often on a monumental scale and with thrilling precision, they capture surfaces of the destroyed city of Baghdad, the snow-covered sites of Serbian mass graves, the barren post-war wastelands of Beirut, the Lebanese refugee camps and Israel's everyday militaristic cult of the dead. The surreal landscapes and alien environments charted by these photographers are as abstract, inhuman, and incomprehensible as the wars that caused them.

Radicalism in the aesthetic projects of these aftermath photographers lies in their taking beautiful photographs of gruesome subjects, needing to be read against themselves. One could argue that photographers like Simon Norfolk and Paul Seawright rely upon a process, which sublimates the seduction of beauty into the horror of violence. Their work exploits this violent dialectic at the moment of realization. Thus, the aesthetics of sublimity serves not to transcend violence but to collapse into it, prompting a strange revelation or reflection upon the real that would otherwise be buried. Their carefully composed nature, the often lengthy exposure time and the beautifully printed form, contrasts starkly, and offers an ideological alternative to, the cheap current of 24-hour live coverage of the world's news agencies, and the form of
spectatorship this promotes (Debrix, 2006 p.768). In moving against the shocking televised images that are assumed to have lost their power, these careful, slow photographs force a deeper kind of reflection on important subjects too often lost in the media's glare. Equally, heightening the aesthetic and artistic status of the photograph enables withdrawal from the medium's purely documentary function and unburdens the image from photojournalism's truth claims. It releases itself from the exploitative or instrumental context that sees photojournalism manipulated by the largely conservative and nationally biased media organizations that determine its context and reception.

Such romanticist aesthetics have been comprehensively criticized and today seem obsolete, like 'an edifice which stands still, but on rotten foundations, propped up by vested interests' (Dollimore, 2003; cited in Joughin and Malpas, 2003 p.40). In aligning itself with the elitist aesthetics of the Enlightenment, does this photography not risk creating a meta-level of artificiality? Does it not in fact empty warfare of its moral content, picturing it instead in terms of a 'dreamlike landscape, like a furnace,' as Ernst Jünger called the aerial images of World War I? (Hüppauf, 1993 p.59). Do representations of the military sublime risk articulating a moral realism that could turn into 'an iconographic apologia of a philosophy of harmony in the face of total destruction'? (ibid, p.55). Doesn't the dividing line between beautification of war and a photographic realism attempting to visualize the destructive might of contemporary warfare as involuntarily consumed by the coherence and consistency of the surface, blur? (ibid.). In focusing upon landscapes of the aftermath of war, Simon Norfolk and Paul Seawright are perhaps in danger of displacing violence from the political (carried out by subjects and inflicted upon subjects) to the natural. In this context, photography cannot but objectify and universalize the sublime experience, forcing the beholder of the sublime moment into a position of moral and subjective superiority. While it is clear that this photography is embedded in the subjective and political, the question remains: does a war photography
that seeks to represent the inhuman, abstract world of this contemporary military sublime offer any resistance to it?

My own work differs significantly from the work of the artists-photographers Simon Norfolk and Paul Seawright. Remaining faithful to the humanist tradition and the concept of social responsibility (Petsini, 2007), I gradually start distancing myself from my subject, without though becoming disengaged, giving priority to content over aesthetics. In that sense I am not a photojournalist anymore. I do not cover the news anymore; I work independently and without a journalist and I am not interested in the unemotional recording of any extremities.

I feel closer to Simon Norfolk than to Paul Seawright, due to the fact that he conveys the "immediate" nature of his subject matter and at the same time he captures the event via his temporal "identification" with it. I, too, I am an eye witness and I consider that it is better to physically be where an event takes place — though, at a certain distance, which I believe is the optimal one: namely, close enough to feel what happens and far enough to remain neutral. In fact, I believe that if the photographer attempts to get too close to what happens in the "shooting" field, then his/her presence alone unknowingly becomes "part" of the event, thus, altering, in one way or another, the events themselves. On the other hand, staying too far away, as Paul Seawright seems to do, might also result in a rather disengaged "sight", which, again, "misses" the facts of life. In addition, I am interested in the permanent nature of the picture and I resist the news coverage and scheduled events.

Aftermath photography is by default less dramatic. I feel as if I am working between the two extremes. I create images that primarily address the media and only secondly, address the gallery system and the market for books. It is a fact that my images are far better received when they are promoted in printed media than in an exhibition. But is not this the main purpose of photojournalism to reach as large an audience as possible?
Moving into galleries and book publishing has been one of the few ways for photographers to step around the restrictions imposed by the mass media. Apart from Sebastião Salgado many others have tried to make work outside the daily pressures of conventional news coverage. While his *Serra Pelada* pictures (1986) certainly make an immediate impact, the work of Philip Jones Griffiths, Susan Meiselas and Gilles Peress tends to be reflective, dealing with long-term issues, and dwelling on the visible aspect of structural problems. They often work with sequences of pictures rather than going for the single shocking or striking example (Stallabrass, 1997).

However, this kind of photography operates totally differently from the hard-hitting documentary shots of photojournalists that focus on human suffering. In an age where we have become numb to the graphic images we see on a daily basis, these beautiful images of terrible subjects that avoid gruesome elements -mutilated bodies and terrified civilians- become more powerful because they let imagination do the work. Contemplation of beauty allows us to absorb the horrific reality of the situation. Images have been reproached for being a way of watching suffering at a distance, as if there were some other way of watching. But watching up close –without the mediation of an image– is still just watching' (Sontag, 2004 p.105).

It goes without saying that problems arise when evidence and art mix. Which has more social value, aftermath photography or photojournalism?

Large prints in *The Sublime Image of Destruction* (2008) by Simon Norfolk, Paul Seawright, Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, achieve resolution of detail beyond that which can be absorbed on a screen or printed page, justifying their size. Limitations in movement and subject matter due to the big cameras needed to produce them set up a distance between gallery art -

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4 Among them Philip Jones Griffiths, Susan Meiselas and Gilles Peress.
5 The Sublime Image of Destruction – Brighton Photo Biennial 2008 Exhibition Catalog
which is what they are- and day-to-day reportage. The results are powerful, sometimes bleak and disengaged: that is the price of becoming art, of implying rather than depicting the human predicament, of demanding longer, slower looking from the audience (Campbell, 2009 p.67).

In his *Critique of Judgment* (1790), Immanuel Kant, investigating the sublime, states 'we call that sublime which is absolutely great'. The term "sublime" is generally used to describe the vast, awe-inspiring greatness, power and beauty of nature. Often presenting stately, decorative, and extraordinarily beautiful views of war zone sites after the event, this strange new genre of fine art photography is an artistic response to the impact of conflict. The criticism against it is that such epic, highly aesthetic images of other peoples' suffering are viewed purely within artistic contexts.

*The Sublime Image of Destruction* raised questions about the political meaning and efficacy of these images; it is hard to discern an overt political standpoint in some of the works. But it is the artists' intention that it should be. With Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, there's a sophisticated understanding of how nations define themselves through images, and through interplay between the transformation and representation of the landscape.

'A war picture can run the gamut from straight reporting through legal evidence and propaganda to art'. At each step along the road the caption changes until, in some collection of one man's great photographs, it may dwindle down to an endnote saying when and where it was taken. Images strong enough to be seen as art tell their stories insistently. Words seem a distraction from the visual statement (ibid, p.69).

The exhibitions at the Barbican Gallery (2008) depicted war related imagery, for example: "On the Subject of War" presented work by Geert van Kesteren (from *Why Mister, Why?* and *Baghdad Calling*), Paul Chan (*Tin Drum Trilogy*), Omer Fast (*The Casting*) and An-My Le (*29 Palms and Events Ashore*) – all
with reference to military action in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Photography manuals stating that it is not the camera but the person using it that matters are only telling part of the truth. In war, new cameras, faster emulsions and better lenses abetted what Janet Malcolm calls ‘the camera’s profound misanthropy’, its tendency ‘to show things in their worst possible aspect’, its ‘willingness to go to unpleasant places where no one wants to venture’ (Malcolm, 1990 p.13).

‘Over the decades, war photographs by Matthew Brady, Robert Capa, Don McCullin, Larry Burrows and Philip Jones Griffiths have all followed that path. It is as though, once they become photographic art, a different response is called for. The job of reporting, politics or propaganda having been done, aesthetics can take over.’ (Campbell, 2009 pp.69-70).

Yet recurrent arguments about famous war photographs show that even when seen coolly displayed in books and galleries, away from the magazines and newspapers where they were first exposed, a challenge to their status as evidence is effective. Was the flag really first raised on Iwo Jima in the way the photograph suggests? It wasn’t. To know that the sense the picture gives is false leaves one disappointed. Was Robert Capa’s picture of a Spanish soldier really taken at the moment a bullet felled him? It seems it almost certainly was and that removes a doubt affecting its status, even as art. Photography is in that regard different from other graphic arts. To find that Goya’s phrase ‘I saw this’, engraved under one of his etchings in The Disasters of War, was not strictly true would not diminish its force. It is not just their status as evidence that makes photographs different. Even when the subject wants evidence shown -as the friends of the girl I photographed in the Iraq war- responsibility attaches to its use. (see figure 3, 2003a).
The vocabulary of taking and shooting may suggest violence, but framing a picture can do almost the opposite – disengage the photographer from the action being recorded. There are descriptions by war photographers of being in great danger but somehow cut off from it by the very act of having to compose things in a viewfinder. To be cut off from the pain of others - isn't that a moral failing? To make your living from it, at the very least from making representative icons out of individuals having a bad time, can be both a kind of aggression and an act of abandonment. It sits uneasily within attitudes relating both to privacy and to the rights of the individual that are increasingly recognized and legislated for. War photographers have suggested about their craft that the stress of seeing bad things and not being able to do much about them eventually shows. Those who record combat while facing the same dangers as the people they photograph are less likely to be accused of voyeurism than those who, with full stomachs, coolly photograph starving children or the bereaved. Photography is much more of a performance art than the end product's resemblance to drawings and paintings might suggest. (Campbell, 2009 p.71).
So, is it right to present images from other people's suffering as art? The media has always sought to be both disturbing and appealing. That overdose of interpretable information is the precise quality that distinguishes conflict journalism today from how it was ten years ago. Inevitably the viewer now selects from a storm of media practitioners—perhaps a foreign TV station, bloggers, papers, an Imams’ sermons on DVD—a few whose vision they trust.

In Chapter Two, when presenting the exhibitions Why Mister Why? and Baghdad Calling by Geert Van Kesteren, and the projects Iraq through the Lens of Vietnam and The Incommensurable Banner by Thomas Hirschhorn, included in the Brighton Photo Biennial 2008, I shall attempt to approach answers to these questions in more depth. Here I can just focus on the questions, since they have been escorting my work since the beginning.

My creations have always been produced within constrained contexts. I have undertaken dozens of picture assignments for magazines with the objectivity and ethical dedication challenged by the restrictions of photojournalism.

It is customary to judge art in terms of intentionality; we generally conceive of artists as individuals who work in circumstances that permit them a great deal of freedom, and we consequently judge their art in terms of the degree to which they are able to realize their intentions. However, the situation with photojournalists is somewhat different. A photojournalist is a particular mixture of artist, artisan and a multiskilled worker. Although self-expression is an important element in their work, they are almost always restricted by the requirement to photograph exactly what they are assigned to, at any cost or taking any risk. Furthermore, they often have little or no say about the ways in which their work is finally utilized—namely, about which images are chosen for publication from among the many they have taken, about how these are cropped or where they are placed, about the captions chosen to accompany the photos, or about the very uses of their pictures. (see figure 4).
It is clear that photographers like Simon Norfolk and Paul Seawright often have the freedom to choose what and how they photograph, without the time constraints imposed by the necessity of "covering" a news story, an organized propaganda event, or a social event. On the contrary, it appears that they can work, intensely, we should admit, for short periods of time on predetermined locations, rather than having to produce images on a daily or even weekly basis, year after year.

However, I think some viewers will still wonder how that commitment to engage combines with the apparent distance -physical and emotional- the works put between themselves and their subjects. Do they still retain meaning if the message is rendered abstract and obscure by disconnection and distance? I reckon it might be a matter of the habits and the constraints of museum photography. Those massive, spectacular prints that adorn museum walls are made with medium or even large-format view cameras, the kind you use with a tripod and (perhaps) a cloth thrown over your head. They are wonderful at capturing detail in broad scenes but generally not so good for rendering movement close-up, the very essence of photojournalism. If people do appear, they tend to be immobile and/or distant. (see figure 5).
Here technical constraints and some ideological suspicion of too overt an engagement come together to produce that 'abstract disconnection'. I think that such works may carry meanings that can be quite variable. Maybe they run the risk that in drawing on the sublime, and on distancing, they produce a view in which the artist stands above and outside any conflict and merely reports on it, almost as though it was a natural phenomenon.

'Transforming is what art does, but photography that bears witness to the calamitous and the reprehensible is much criticized if it seems 'aesthetic'; That is, too much like art... Photographs that depict suffering shouldn't be beautiful, as captions shouldn't moralize. In this view, a beautiful photograph drains attention from the sobering subject and turns it toward the medium itself, thereby compromising the picture's status as a document ....' (Sontag, 2002 p.94). 'To suffer is one thing; another thing is living with the photographed images of suffering, which does not necessarily strengthen conscience and the ability to be compassionate; it can also corrupt them' (Sontag, 1979 p.20).

Figure 5 ©Simon Norfolk, Balloon vendor, Afghanistan, 2002.
Some of these artists, Simon Norfolk for example, have also worked as photojournalists. One of the reasons they’ve moved towards the art world is because their work has been frozen out of the mass media. Giving priority to aesthetic concerns may compromise ethical or journalistic content.

I think the aesthetic is difficult to avoid, even in photojournalism. One of the striking contrasts in the photography on show in Brighton Photo Biennial 2008 is that between the aesthetics of North Vietnamese photographers and their Western counterparts. The former were influenced by the French Humanist movement: their work has a very lyrical component, rather reminiscent of the work of Robert Doisneau or Willy Ronis. But the Western photographers - influenced by Garry Winogrand, Lee Friedlander, William Klein and Robert Frank - had a stronger photojournalistic aspect in their work. Theirs was a very different style - but still an aesthetic style. Simon Norfolk’s defense of his own work, for instance, is that people are drawn in by the beauty of it. Later they realize, as they continue to look -because these photographs encourage sustained looking- another, more political message emerging (ibid.).

The photojournalistic tradition exemplified by the star photographers of the Vietnam War who seemed to offer unmediated truth involved, one now sees, exercises in visual rhetoric. Such photographers used compositional habits that can be tracked back through Goya or Delacroix. They are true in their own way, touching and wonderful, but not visually innocent. (Campbell, 2009 p.67).

In terms of the spectrum between the artist and the photojournalist movements, considering their contributors, I would position myself somewhere in the middle, since it is the photojournalists’ work that moves me most, but I also strongly believe that photojournalism is an art, being an expressive form, not technique. Photojournalism deals with ethical dilemmas while art and aftermath photography retain the right of being distant. No matter how, the
story has to be told and we both tell stories on concrete ideological values. Aftermath photography's aesthetic priority gives to the author room for objectivity. Though, while objectivity is non-debatable, the image's beauty is. If beauty is the tool to transform a war picture into an "art object" then this, I believe, can be considered unethical.

But is war representation intended for rarefied viewing in a museum or on the wall of some rich collector? If that is true, then why should photojournalism be excluded? Photojournalism frequently presents ugly truths with such beauty! Quoting Magnum photographer Paulo Pellegrin '...form and composition are the "tools" of photographic vision and in this respect they can and should be used to produce powerful images; I am not disturbed by beautiful images, on the contrary, I think a good image has a greater potential of making an impact.' Sontag claimed that "beautifying" in photography "tends to bleach out a moral response to what is shown." Even if the photographer's express intention is to arouse indignation at injustice, will the beauty of a picture instead transmute the sorrow of the subject into the pleasure of satisfaction of others? (Reinhardt, 2007 p.13).

If aftermath photography serves an aesthetic form of communication there is no issue. Disengagement is the key word. Since both movements provoke discussions, they both raise a problem. 'There are certainly times or ways in which turning the suffering of another human being into a beautiful or formally elegant image seems somehow indecent.' (ibid, p.19).

Photojournalism as art practices a form of aesthetics connected to not only pleasing the eye, but also providing the viewer with a context for understanding the world around us in unique ways. Many photojournalists learn early on that the pictures they make have to conform to the expectations of the public. In recent years, the introduction of digital technologies has challenged long-standing beliefs and codes of conduct associated with ethical photojournalistic norms. At the same time, the proliferation of digital
photography on the Internet as well as the economic pressures placed on news organizations through media consolidation and corporate downsizing tests not only ethical principles, but aesthetic concerns as well.

Today's photojournalism, it is sometimes argued, is far more visually sophisticated than their predecessors lugging around a 4x5 Graflex camera and a pocket full of flash bulbs. Tolerance for staged images that lack visual impact is far less acceptable today than it was even 20 years ago. Pictures, therefore, must do more than simply inform; they must also please. Today photographers appear to be taking more aesthetic chances that move them further away from the realm of journalism and more into the realm of art. However, many readers don't want or even expect their news to be arty – they have been trained to think that's not what journalism is about. Unfortunately, in today's hyper-media world the pressure is not only to inform but to also entertain. Therefore, when a news picture is treated as art in order to distinguish it from other media, the public may actually see the effort as a gimmick, or even worse, as a disingenuous attempt to sensationalize the news.

The tools photojournalists use in composing images -selective focus, framing, use of light, and movement- all conform to a photojournalistic grammar, one that seeks to convey immediacy, intensity and intimacy. This grammar or the system of structural relationships employed in constructing meaning in a picture is one of the things that distinguish photojournalism from other genres.

'A fine photojournalist plants one foot firmly within the visual pursuit of objective reality as we know it ... keenly aware of a role as a professional eyewitness ... But a great photojournalist also plants the other foot firmly within the subjective experience, with its passion, dedication, artistry, and drive to document people at their best and worst – and often with a clear point of view and at great sacrifice.' (Newton, 2001 p.52). 'The work of the photojournalist abounds with an apparent realism [...] the result is an
everyday, seemingly transparent, aesthetic realism dropping into our homes in a steady drip of blood, smiles, tears, triumph and sorrow. The point of visual reportage is realism, not art. Yet, often, art is created in the process and is what makes an image of photojournalism compelling.' (ibid.).

In this context I define myself as a photojournalist with a tendency to embrace the aftermath movement. However, my work could be considered artistic, not only whenever it is exhibited in museums and galleries, but also if it becomes a historical reference point.
Chapter Two

'Let the atrocious images haunt us. Even if they are only tokens, and cannot possibly encompass most of the reality to which they refer, they still perform a vital function. The images say: This is what human beings are capable of doing, may volunteer to do, enthusiastically, self-righteously. Don't forget.' (Sontag, 2004a p.102).

Citizen Photography

Chapter Two examines citizen photography and the complex issues emerging from the act of depicting human suffering, focusing on the example of Baghdad Calling by Geert Van Kesteren, and then it revisits the ethics of photojournalism in the new context that amateur digital photos set beyond photojournalism.

We live in an age of cheap technology and phone cameras, where images can be instantly transmitted and published through a vast array of printed and digital media, most significantly, the Internet: anybody with a digital camera and web access can be a "journalist". Media consumers have become writers and publishers themselves. Millions of people write blogs, publish their own pictures and videos, or post comments on mainstream media sites while pictures appear online almost instantly when an event happens.

This new reality generates a series of questions: What should be photographed, by whom and how? What does it mean to use, make or view images of conflict? What is the weight of professionalism and how important is proximity in witnessing the event? Who is authorized to convey war photographs to the world? These are difficult questions for photographers and all of us who look at images of human suffering and violence, whether in the
newspapers, on television, or on the Internet. Should we look? Or look away? The exhibitions *Why Mister, Why?* and *Baghdad Calling* by Geert Van Kesteren, and *Iraq through the Lens of Vietnam* and *The Incommensurable Banner* by Thomas Hirschhorn in the Brighton Photo Biennial 2008 attempt an answer.

'Capa implied that photojournalism's reportorial powers derive largely from the physical and emotional proximity of the photographers to their subjects and their ability, thereby, to witness events firsthand. Due, however, to the recent influx of such technologies as television, video, and digital media, contemporary photojournalism seems to have lost much of its witnessing authority' (Duganne, 2007, p.57).

It has happened to many of my colleagues, even to me to a certain extent, and it has become a robust belief of mine, which I have to state here: our constant exposure to images of war can have an anesthetizing, numbing effect. For those who have never experienced war, these images are unimaginable, and impossible to truly comprehend. As I perceive it, today, the ability of photography to shock and outrage has ceased, giving way to hopeless apathy.

There are few dead bodies pictured in the news, particularly of Westerners, and specifically of Western (American) soldiers. We are presented with a censored, strangely sanitized view of the mutilating effects of warfare. In addition, many photojournalists are "embedded" within military units (this keeps them safer) providing a restricted perspective; this extensively happened in the Iraq war where many photographers were embedded within the US military.

Contemporary artists in gallery contexts have addressed some ethical questions. Thomas Hirschhorn's *The Incommensurable Banner*, a deeply political and anti-war installation at Fabrica in the Brighton Photo Biennial 2008, is an 18-meter long banner of the most repulsive pictures of mutilated
bodies retrieved online. Difficult to look at, even for the experienced eye of a photo editor, they are the images that the media do not show widely. His work questions the reasons why, and forces viewers to engage directly with what the images tell. Julian Stallabrass says of the exhibition: ‘It is better than suppressing it. I’m not saying it’s a comfortable thing to do.’ (2008a, p.4).

Operating differently than Paul Seawright and much more than Simon Norfolk, Thomas Hirschhorn does not even visit the place of conflict to take his pictures. On the contrary, he uses Internet downloaded pictures (of bad quality due to their low resolution and to the amateur means used) and he creates a collage of extremities, which is characterized of unbelievable violence. It is impossible to know the origin of the banner’s images, nor the war from which they were taken, since he provides us with no information whatsoever about his visual expression. It seems that this installation has no beginning and no end. Moreover, by repeatedly iterating violence in a vicious circle he actually abolishes any humanistic concept and produces an intense feeling of aversion to the spectator. As Mark Durden states ‘[...] Hirschhorn positions images of atrocity in a context of the impassioned commitment, urgency and outrage of those protesting against such wars. ‘Borrowing the language of the war protestor’ Thomas Hirschhorn seems to try to challenge the social feeling by asking the question whether the very use of such pictures offends the victims’ dignity. (2012).

The images in Thomas Hirschhorn’s banner (see figure 6) are dissimilar to the aesthetic tendency in photojournalism, as the latter is documented in pictures currently published in valid Western printed media. We frequently see the former published mainly in Muslim countries, which are at a state of war, often functioning as propaganda; in addition, they are available in thousands on the Internet and on anonymous blogs. Most are pictures taken by amateurs and could be seen as “medical” records of what war and contemporary weapons can do to human bodies.
On the other hand, one cannot blame the technique of juxtaposition by itself. For example, the exhibitions *Why, Mister, Why?* and *Baghdad Calling* and their accompanying books by Geert Van Kesteren document the everyday life of Iraqi civilians. This is one of the few photographic attempts to offer a synthetic and realistic view of the Iraq war, tracking the brutal tactics of the coalition forces, the many humiliations ordinary Iraqis endure under the occupation and the unearthing of mass graves of victims of Saddam Hussein’s dictatorship. In his book, *Baghdad Calling*, Van Kesteren (2008) worked with Iraqi refugees, millions of whom have been driven away by the conflict. Amateur photographs taken by Iraqi people themselves using mobile phones are presented alongside Van Kesteren’s own photographs.

### 2.1 War through photography

‘In a news world where the public can encounter a very wide range of views through the web they will rapidly turn away from public service broadcasters who fail to encompass the range of views within society.’ (Horrocks, 2008).
War has never before been pursued in such an environment of image-saturation and easy and rapid image distribution. 'Embedding of journalists and photojournalists in the Iraq war was a rather brilliant strategy by the Pentagon to offer a good deal of access to writers and photographers, but at the same time to strongly encourage identification with the troops - and the conditions under which they laboured - above all else.' (Stallabrass, 2008b.) But censorship is increased now; mainly due to the army laying down rules about what should and shouldn't be photographed; sometimes even staging actions for the cameras. Thus, what comes out doesn't at all reflect the ghastly situation in that country. Unembedded photojournalists have greater freedom, but take greater risks. In the Vietnam War, when most worked independently, 135 photojournalists were killed. 230 have died in Iraq.

Nicholas Sautin observes ‘While mainstream networks were still fretting over whether to show flag-draped coffins on the nightly news, wrestling internally over the complicated ethics of embedded journalism, camera phones quietly and permanently altered the journalistic landscape.’ (2010). On the other hand there's a strange contrast between the conservative and monolithic character of much of the mass media, and the fact that you can see anything you want to on the web: from Iraqi resistance sites to beheadings, truck bombings and all the rest of it. If you wish to look, if you have the initiative and the strength to look, you can find it all on the web.

Julian Stallabrass says about the Iraq war: 'Most famously, the war opened with the 'shock and awe' assault on the Iraqi infrastructure, a bloody firework display intended to terrify the Iraqi Army into surrender, and to broadcast the extent of the US military prowess to the world. Reporters, photographers and TV crews in the Palestine Hotel (see figure 7, 2003b), had a ringside view of the bombardment taking place across the river.' (2008a.)
The US armed forces were not fond of unilaterals, often stopped them from reporting, and were sometimes responsible for their deaths: Terry Lloyd of ITN was killed, and the Baghdad office of Al-Jazeera was bombed in April 2003, killing their correspondent in the city. On April 8, 2003 a U.S. Army tank fired into the 15th floor of the Palestine Hotel in Baghdad, where almost all the foreign journalists were based. The tank fire killed the Reuters cameraman Taras Protsyuk and wounded three (see figure 8). José Couso of Telecinco Spanish television who was on the 14th floor also died.

There is always a moral need to question our right to witness atrocity: ‘Perhaps the only people with the right to look at images of suffering of this extreme order are those who could do something to alleviate it... or those who could learn from it. The rest of us are voyeurs, whether or not we mean to be.’ (Sontag, 2004a, p.67)
Cut-off in terms of time and space, unframed and arbitrary, the amateur digital footages delivered in bulk on the Internet serve neither any aesthetic purpose of composition nor documented testimony of an event. They are imposed on spectators’ eyes (and minds) without informing us about the who? where? and why? of those who are killed. ‘We entertain the notion that we are too sophisticated even to ask. We are looking at the war, and we are looking at ourselves looking. All that remains is what Sontag calls “the pleasure of flinching.”’ (Sautin, 2010)

2.2 Morality and aesthetics

Images become part of what Susan Sontag (2004a) calls the vast repository of pictures that make it difficult to sustain the “moral defectiveness” of ignorance or innocence in the face of suffering. Images may only be an invitation to pay attention, to ask: ‘Who caused what the picture shows? Who is responsible? Is it excusable? Was it inevitable? Is there some state of affairs which we have accepted up to now that ought to be challenged?’ (ibid., p.117).

These conflicting tendencies and controversies raise numerous questions
about the very act of photographing and about the work that photographs can do. What forms of picturing, for example, respect the dignity and agency of those shown? What forms assault the integrity of the spectator? What will mobilize useful action and what will, instead, exacerbate the injury? How much do the answers depend on the site of the encounter between image and viewer—for example, newspaper, magazine, monitor, book, or museum?

The apparent symbiosis of suffering and spectacle has inspired certain Western media to claim that we are no longer capable of seeing the evidence of the pain of others; benumbed or hated, we watch it pass by in a blur. Some photographers choose to augment the image itself with ancillary documentation, including, for example, the verbal testimony of the subject; others claim to empower the pictured individuals by paying them for posing. Some call themselves photojournalists, accommodating the exigencies and timetables of mass media; others call themselves artists, retaining control of their work and the format of its publication.

When it comes to the faces of American sufferers, things change. Since 2003 in order to be embedded with the American forces photographers must agree not to take pictures showing dead or wounded servicemen (Katovsky and Carlson, 2004 pp.401-417). Photographs of dead American soldiers are not easy to find in the American media. Indeed, the US Marine image (see figure 9) could just as accurately have been titled American Military Casualties. While in the beginning reportage offered virtually no visual record of Iraqi civilians suffering during the invasion, more recent journalistic coverage of the continuing violence shows more pictures of Iraqi than of American casualties. According to a comprehensive Los Angeles Times study of the contents of major news sources from September 11, 2004, through February 28, 2005, neither that paper nor The New York Times and The Washington Post, nor Time and Newsweek magazines published a single picture of a dead American soldier but forty-one pictures of dead Iraqis. (Rainey, 2005 p.A1).
The ‘US Marine killed’ picture (see figure 9, 2003c) is one of the very rare showing an American soldier killed in action and possibly it is the only picture where the corpse can be identified. The Village Voice (see figure 10, 2003d) was the only newspaper in the U.S.A. that published a picture of a dead American soldier in the Iraq war. Following the publication, Village Voice was challenged by many public reactions including the soldier’s family. After the entrance of American troops in Baghdad (5/4/2003) and the rejoicing and the removal of all of Saddam Hussein’s symbols, a large part of the Westerners believed that the war had ended. However, during the following months, the American army counted significant losses, which were filtered out from the US media. In the end of 2003, when, at last, the Operation Iraqi Freedom had started tiring the American spectators and with the pretext of the return of the dead American soldiers, the first anti-war articles were published. The publication of ‘US Marine killed’ picture in the Village Voice took place eight (8) months after the event, based on the articles mentioned above as justification.
Until that moment the average American had not seen any visual evidence of dead Americans and if the war had ended on time, one could even draw the simplistic conclusion that only the Iraqis had losses.

Certainly, the situation was different in Europe, where Stern magazine published this picture only a few days after the event. The shooting happened one week after the Americans entered Baghdad, while absolute chaos ruled the Iraqi capital. At that time I was on assignment for Stern magazine, covering the situation in the city's hospitals, together with the magazine's journalist Andreas Albes, and we happened to witness cross fires outside the Saddam Medical City Hospital. The said US Marine soldier was shot by a sniper, at a short distance from me.

The marine died shortly after from his wounds. The Pentagon identified the soldier as being Cpl. Jesus A. Gonzalez, 22, of Indio, Calif., killed while manning a checkpoint in Baghdad. He was assigned to 1st Tank Battalion, 1st Marine Division, Twenty-Nine Palms, California. A few moments after the
shooting, in an extremely “charged” atmosphere and while the wounded marine was being carried to the Saddam Medical City Hospital for emergency medical treatment by Iraqi doctors, I managed to take the particular picture, right at the entrance of the hospital, despite the insults and the strong kick I received by his colleague (in the picture to the right) (Kontos, 2003e).

Eight years later the war has officially ended but it is still raging and there is no end in sight. In fact the situation on the ground has deteriorated so much that it has become too dangerous for us photographers to make the sort of long journey through Iraq that we made in the wake of the invasion. Never before in history have so many journalists, cameramen and photographers been killed in a single war: 230 media professionals, of whom 172 were journalists. (Reporters without borders, 2010).

When running stories on soldiers killed in combat, most papers and magazines illustrated them with pictures of grieving families or memorial services back home. As Susan Sontag remarked, ‘The more remote or exotic the place, the more likely we are to have full frontal views of the dead and dying’ (Sontag, 2004a p.70).

2.3 Baghdad Calling / Why Mister, Why?

The exhibition Why Mister, Why? / Baghdad Calling⁶ at the Barbican Art Gallery in London by Dutch photojournalist Geert Van Kesteren approaches the daunting complexity of the Iraq-war from the perspective of the individual, applying editing and collating techniques together with more traditional approaches. In particular, while in the first project, which can be characterised as sentimental and affective, especially as opposed to the work of Hirschhorn described above, he photographs the fates of the Iraqi population at the hands of the US Military following the invasion, in a rather traditional approach, while in the second he mainly uses their photographs to represent their own reality,

⁶ The work was simultaneously exhibited at the Brighton Photo Biennial 2008.
going beyond photojournalism.

In early 2007, when Van Kesteren spoke with a doctor in Amman, Jordan, he was shown an image taken using a mobile phone, a portrait of a wounded friend just before he died. *The New York Times* (Cave, 2006) reported ‘[...] there are now 7.1 million cell phone subscribers in Iraq, up from 1.4 million two years ago. It is the relentless violence that seems to have fertilized the industry's growth. Insurgents use phones to communicate and to detonate bombs, while Iraqis of all sects rely on their phones to avoid danger.’

Van Kesteren noticed that refugees use their mobile phones as family albums. He also came across the gruesome fact that for criminals and murderers the mobile phone is an important tool, as in the case where a kidnapper uses the mobile of the victim to contact the family or where the coroner uses the mobile of the dead person to inform the bereaved family of their loss. So he decided to let the pictures of ordinary, non-professional photographers tell the story.

The exhibition presents some professional images that Van Kesteren took for *Why Mister, Why?* (2004) and amateur mobile phone images, sent to family and friends outside the war zone by Iraqi people from inside the war zone.

Amateur images from *Baghdad Calling* (2005-2007) link to the people who are featured in the news every day, but whom we never really encounter. The fact that the images are not by professional photographers, who are often outsiders, increase their narrative power. Iraqi civilians have made the mobile phone into the modern equivalent of the newspaper. They use it to inform one another of private and public events in the theatre of war.

Their projected enlargements of the images at Lighthouse in the Brighton Photo Biennial 2008 make a strong and vivid impact: up close you see pixels and other chaotic details. Viewed from a distance they become icons, Mementos of war; personal, intimate and emotional. As a group they have a
narrative momentum, revealing what was hidden for the mainstream media.

‘Where violence dominates, people flee, and in Iraq that has been seen on a massive scale,’ Jan Gruiters writes in the foreword to the book (2008). More than two million Iraqis have fled the country, crossing primarily over the borders of Jordan, Syria. This fact is the basis for Baghdad Calling.

Van Kesteren takes the same political stance as Philip Jones Griffiths in his classic work Vietnam, Inc. (2001), focusing on the impact that the war has on non-combatants. ‘My photography did not in any way square up to the horror of the stories of the refugees,’ Van Kesteren explained (2008). ‘It missed what I see as the cornerstone of my photojournalism: the laying bare of the essence of a situation and making that visual through the perspective of the individual.’ (ibid.).

In her essay New Directions, Brigitte Lardinois writes that Van Kesteren created as powerful a statement as possible by looking to the refugees themselves and how they used mobile phone photography ‘to map out families, friends, fears and hopes for a new Iraq.’ Baghdad Calling is a book of assembled stories of Iraqi citizens living in Turkey, Syria, Jordan and Iraq, not the work of one author but of dozens. (2008).

The amateur photographs portray a dead city, shocking sights that are presented without any contemporary aesthetics. When cameras venture outdoors they are usually shooting out of car windows. When the camera operator is out on the street, the photos convey a strong sense of being exposed to danger. Others describe the destruction of neighborhoods and the bodies that can be found littered along the roadsides, hands tied behind their backs: direct responses all the more horrifying by the sketchy image quality of amateur tools. (see figure 11).
Besides, Baghdad is far too dangerous now for any foreign journalist; therefore all the media are using local correspondents no matter the price of objectivity. Iraqis reach places Western photographers can no longer go: the streets of the Iraqi capital, and few other cities in Iraq, as well as in south-west Afghanistan. ‘Their ragged, often fuzzy, poorly framed pictures contain their own terrible beauty. The fear of the cell-phone snapper is contained in almost every frame.’ (Fisk, 2008).

Baghdad Calling is a unique record of life in Iraq from 2005 to 2007. It’s also the first time that the life of a country has been captured on mobile phones. Indeed, Van Kesteren believes that cell phones will play an increasingly important role in documenting life and human rights, not only in Iraq but also in other conflict zones:

‘We as professionals we have all these restrictions in doing our work,
and civilians have taken over a big part of that role we play within democracy...! I think the cell phone plays a very essential role in protecting human rights because it tells a truth. But therein lies the difficulty because the photographers are not professionals. So people can make images or make up images.' (Radio Netherlands, 2008).

What is a very interesting thing to note, in social and political terms, is that despite the fact that digital technologies have permitted a multitude of camera users to have their own say on how, when and "how much" to "depict" reality (as each one perceives it), there is however no characteristic social or political movement of protest against the atrocities of the digitized and "technologized" modern wars. There is no anti-war movement, like the one that arose during the time of Vietnam, and even the mild sparks of protest that can be detected here and there, particularly on the internet, seem not to have the power to occupy a place in the history of social movements. Stallabrass (ibid.), believes that, in order to evaluate and understand the reasons behind this phenomenon it is necessary to consider '[...]' the changing relationships between military strategy, the conduct of war, the media, and its technology. All are intimately connected, and all have been undergoing deep transformations.' (ibid., p.4).

The example he gives, which is the example on which every historian of photography insists, is the Iraq War. It is a fact that this war has been the most intensively reported in history. More than twice the numbers of journalists and photojournalists (among other professionals) than the ones who covered the Vietnam War have actually made a career on the case of Iraq. Technological developments allowed the multitude of TV channels, the internet websites, the networks that interconnected journalists, photographers, witnesses, soldiers, civilians and spectators, most newspapers, magazines, various commonly shared and broad access video platforms, to "bombard" the spectators with millions of images of this war. However, very few of them have managed to stick in the mind: a '[...] number of photographs had done that for the Vietnam War—notably, Eddie Adams' 1968 photograph of the summary execution of a guerrilla suspect, Nick Ut's 1971 photograph of a Vietnamese...
girl running down a road having been burned by napalm, and Ron Haeberle’s photographs of the massacre at My Lai, and much of the work of Philip Jones Griffiths.’ (Stallabrass, ibid., p.5).

But technology was not the only news-broadcasting innovation of the Iraq war. This was the first war where the notion of the “embedded journalist” was conceived. By accepting incorporation into the forces of the military, dozens of journalists were given seemingly uncensored access to the military operations. However, it is true that though censorship did not exist officially, their very positioning inside regimes required the journalists to offer a rather biased view of what they saw – favoring, of course, the side that had favored them. ‘Since many embedded journalists were placed in dangerous circumstances under the protection of the troops, and lived with them for extended periods, this tended to foster a strong identification with their new comrades. Embedding fitted the demands of the news organisations in the US and the UK.’ (ibid., p.6).

In the course of time, though, the soldiers also seem to have taken initiatives. By setting their rules and by, indirectly, controlling the coverage of the operations they complied with the media’s request to provide to their spectators a ‘controlled and sanitised view of the war’ (ibid.). On the other hand, the journalists who worked as “unilaterals” among the Iraqis have based their work a lot on the testimonies of civilians and resistance fighters, unavoidably thus providing again a biased picture of the war (in this case full of blood and desperation, depicting the systematic destruction of a deeply damaged, though still functioning, society).

2.4 Photojournalism revisited

The profession of photojournalism bloomed in the era of the glossy illustrated magazines of the 60s, 70s and 80s. After that it started steadily declining. On
the contrary, technology, with its digital cameras, mobile phone cameras and the like, seems to have given rise to other kind of “professional” (who, though, go usually unpaid...) the so called “citizen journalists”.

Is this the new journalism? Is photojournalism transformed by digital citizenship images? Nick Davies (2008, pp.396-397), in his book Flat Earth News, argues that the fate of those news media that choose to prefer such practices is disastrous both for them but also for their readers or spectators and, in short, the society as a whole. However, I would argue that the digital citizenship photography debate actually revitalizes and clarifies photojournalism’s key.

Van Kesteren (2008) reported to Mark Durden: ‘When I worked in Iraq as a non-embedded, independent photographer, I focused on the culture clash between the Americans and Iraqis’. He also states:

‘Photojournalism is alive. ....I work by the ethical and moral ethos of photojournalism, but not to make it a lubricant for the media; all they want is that news can be easily consumed and sold. Many modern conflicts are fought out in the media; both sides ...use the news, or create it, to achieve their goals.’ (ibid.).

One might wonder, if witnessing is the critical parameter, then do we really need the skilled and qualified photojournalist? Van Kesteren claims that, as a photojournalist one is an autonomous unit observing the world ‘from the shadow of the happening, with an open eye and often a promise to give voice to the people who gave you such an intimate look at a difficult time in their lives.’ (ibid.). He believes that independency of the photojournalist makes it possible to look under the surface of news, so as the photographer alone is fully responsible for his reportage. He recalls Capa when he says that ‘Photojournalism is recording the human condition at a significant moment of history and that is all about access, about being there when it happens. Good photojournalism is not created to make beautiful artistic images; it's made because you want to give attention to something important that did not get
I believe that citizenship photography makes the photojournalist even more responsible than before, in fact, it makes him/her redefine the way they work. In the mind of the average spectator, photography still gives a moment of clarity, momentarily puts order onto the chaos of information. Visibility ensures precision. There are certain images that seem able to touch some deep human chords; that have the power to connect people together. But no such image can become an explanation by itself. I do not think that we can speak of objectivity in photojournalism in the traditional meaning of the word – at least not anymore, and at least not with innocence. Indeed, one may argue that a photograph documents that the person behind the camera was the eye witness of a fact, but in fact, 'every choice in the moment of recording, crop, montage, influences the meaning of the image and that is why it is a manipulative medium. As a photojournalist you need to be very sound and careful.' (ibid.).

Van Kesteren admits that:

‘In photojournalism we often show a world so cruel, that it cannot be denied and I see no need to iconize that reality because it is worse as it is. Design and art supports the power of photography, the written language, the fantasy and knowledge of the reader and the witness and happening of the story. .... An artist creates his own world, without restrictions ... A photojournalist does not have that kind of freedom; you always have to take responsibility.' (ibid.).

In his interview he finally states 'I am very concerned about the respect for the media. Our access is limited (see Gaza), often we are targets of violence, hatred. We are just messengers, important messengers I believe' (ibid.).

The majority of photojournalists claim to be driven by a desire to communicate social issues or to use their images to produce social change. Others do this work because they believe they can motivate people just showing them these
images of suffering in these parts of the world. I think photojournalism's "bearing witness" is more about the privileged relationship between the photographer and the subject and the way the photojournalist defines "reality" from the physical location where history is being written.
Chapter Three

North Korea: "The Hermit Kingdom"

Chapter three focuses on photographing North Korea and examines the work of Margaret Bourke-White, Chris Marker and Seok Imsaeng in discussing their grounded responses as opposed to the ideology-driven work of Philippe Chancel, Charlie Crane and Andreas Gursky in this country. At the same time the chapter examines my own representations of North Korea. After my photojournalistic coverage of Iraq, which gave rise to both ethical and aesthetic questions, and given the spread of "citizen photojournalism", North Korea provided me with the context for further questions, which became the vehicles for my aesthetic journey to images beyond photojournalism. (see figure 12, p.100).

In the new millennium a growing number of foreign tourists choose to visit the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea; they want to know, see and learn about the country – and are indeed impressed by the kind services and hospitality of its diligent and honest people who proudly create a modern history in single-hearted unity around their leader. There is a Korean saying that “seeing is believing”. (Welcome to Korea, National Tourism Administration Guidebook, Juche 91, 2002)

North Korea is considered to be the most isolated country in the world. (Cumings, 2004 p.ix). Often called the “Hermit Kingdom”, today it seems more isolated than ever being cut off by the United Nations’ embargo, even at its borders with China, which is the only country with which it has maintained contact and engaged in trade. North Korea is probably the only country in the world where the use of mobile phones and Internet is strictly forbidden and “media” means only state channels. For 61 years, the country has been ruled by the same president, namely the “Great Leader Comrade Kim Il-Sung”, who (unprecedentedly in a Communist regime), has handed down leadership to his son, today called the “Dear Ruler Kim Jong-il” (French, 2007 p.43).
In the aftermath of the Japanese occupation of Korea, which ended with Japan’s defeat in World War II in 1945, Korea was divided at the 38th parallel in accordance with a United Nations arrangement, to be administered by the Soviet Union in the north and the United States in the south. The history of North Korea formally begins with the establishment of the Democratic People’s Republic in 1948. Since then an authoritarian ideological structure has been imposed upon the people. Kim Il-Sung’s regime forces citizens to live under the dictations of “Juche”, the social dogma that replaced Marxist ideology and orders the people to be self-sufficient (Park, 2002b p.13). The Korean War, the final and most deadly conflict in the Cold War, ended in 1953; however, the armistice between North and South remains until today very fragile.

Politically and socially the DPRK, has been compared by Thanassis Moutsopoulos (2007, p.10) to Stalinist Russia or China during the Cultural Revolution. Moutsopoulos argues that ‘The country [...] one of the most ethnically and culturally homogenized on earth, has such minimal influence from the “outside world” that a trip there would be one of the most unusual, rewarding and fascinating travel experiences’ (ibid. p.8).

Visitors are generally considered as privileged guests invited into a closed world; the few who do make the journey receive a rare insight into a society completely alien to our own. Devoid of mobile phones, global news and Internet access, and being constantly escorted by their official guides, they soon realize that everything comes under absolute state control. Nevertheless, for the Western mind, any mention of North Korea prompts George Bush’s “Axis of Evil” and the country’s recent nuclear tests. However, this country’s numerous particularities make it a fascinating place. DPRK is an internationally unique country: the sole instance of uttermost verbatim application of Marxist principles simultaneously to the paramount and extreme cult of a single person: its Leader. Although idolization of a person can be traced back to historic figures such as Stalin, Mao, Ceausescu and Hoxha, all
of whom enjoyed unprecedented displays of fidelity during their lifetimes, or even the modern-day Saddam Hussein, Qaddafi and Turkmenbasi, the "Great Leader Comrade Kim Il-Sung", exceeds them all in both scale and intensity. (ibid. p.10).

The total ban of capitalist activity such as free market and injunction of free communication constitutes another unique aspect of the People's Republic of Korea. Especially since other Marxist regimes like Cuba, or Vietnam and Laos have long since accepted the capitalist penetration.

North Korea is a parallel universe, totally unconnected to the world we know: the globalized capitalist world spread across the entire planet argues Thanassis Moutsopoulos; 'One cannot help but wonder whether, all things said and done, North Korea – the last country of its breed – has not, in fact, achieved a Red utopia?' (ibid. p.10).

3.1 Shooting the country

My Korean photographs are drastically different from the rest of my work. There aren't dramatic exposures that could be related with the photographs I have taken in the world's hot spots (Moutsopoulos and Petsini, 2007): Iraq, Afghanistan, Sierra Leone or Kosovo; there are no human tragedies, deaths, tensions or conflicts. The human drama is absent here; to have given up its place to a delicate depiction of a society that defies logic. In fact, 'the most striking element in these photographs is the extent to which their subject-matter defies our imagination; how peculiar and inexplicable they seem in terms of what we bring to them' (Moutsopoulos, 2007, p.8). Then, there are the 'Commonplaces of the Other', the things that happen unpredictably in front of your eyes at a perfectly graphic environment: girls with Kalashnikovs; crowds walking by giant posters inciting the destruction of American imperialism; a frozen to death female traffic police in a circle; 'the carefree black-clad policeman in dark glasses having a whale of a time in the little
canary-coloured, cat-whiskered bumper car' (ibid. p.9), the Great and Dear Leader's portraits in every possible public and private space.

All these subjects are depicted against an ideal photographic landscape, which is absent of advertising and of what photographers used to call the destructive "visual noise". But this makes constraints even worse: the photographer's willingness and the (obvious) visual freedom come in absolute contradiction with every possible restriction.

My North Korea work is a testimony of the effects of a totalitarian government on a nation frozen in time. My photographs were taken under extremely difficult conditions and under the very nose of the authorities, which employ draconian measures to tightly control what can and what cannot be recorded of this country (essentially nothing is permitted save official monuments and ceremonies). While I am used to working under physical danger in almost all my assignments, in this case, absence of any risk made me feel rather stressed than relaxed.

From the very first moment I arrived in North Korea I had the strong feeling that I was watching a huge performance and that all the citizens I saw were part of it.... I would say that my project reveals how a country, which recently announced to the World that it has a nuclear arsenal, presents itself to the camera through staged events based on a propaganda scenario using carefully chosen leading performers.7

7 These statements are discussed in detail in my text "North Korea: land of Juche ideology", a statement following my photographic work in the Polaris Images Agency.
On May Day 2005 I took a picture (see figure 13, Moutsopoulos and Petsini, 2007b, p.144) of a North Korean man patriotically striking at a replica of an American soldier. The North Korean man was blindfolded. This reminds me that North Koreans know as little about us as we do about them. Each side is fearful of the other. For that reason alone, these photographs are enormously important for me as a photojournalist and as an artist: they make me realize that the people we see are just people, people very much like the rest of us. How can you possibly explain to these people what's going on in the world? Where do you start from? There's no way to communicate with people who live in a bubble as cleverly constructed as the one that Kim Il-Sung has dreamed up. Why would they want anything else? Nevertheless, their drama is not necessarily any worse than ours: 'crushed beneath the deadweight of the media, advertising, consumerism' leading a life 'largely thrown away on the most superficial and insubstantial concerns and filled with the earth-shattering goings-on of the reality shows and the sex lives of stars and starlets' (ibid.).
As John G. Morris observes at his “Look at North Koreans” (Kontos, 2007) ‘The lights go out in North Korea every night at ten o’clock. At midnight, a satellite photograph shows the Korean peninsula divided, half in blackness, half illuminated with the scattered lights of cities…it seems to me inconceivable that these people will ever start a nuclear war.’

From the stunning showcase capital of Pyongyang, peppered with huge socialist monuments and austere architecture, all dissected by wide clean streets, to the de-militarized zone of the south and the mountains of the north, DPRK looks particularly introverted. To the eyes of the foreign visitor the whole country lives in an anachronism. From the declarations that the country possesses nuclear weapons to the trucks equipped with loudspeakers plying marches all over Pyongyang, the country gives the impression of a warrior punching his own chest.

1,500 Western tourists, chosen from different countries, visit North Korea every year together with tens of thousands of Chinese and South Koreans, but the country remains a forbidden destination for foreign reporters. It took me more than three years to find the way to visit North Korea and all my attempts to get a journalistic visa failed several times. I finally managed to visit the country three times as a member of a group of ten “international tourists” and I stayed for fifteen days. I also had the opportunity to travel in the countryside, which turned out to be very important for scenes of everyday life.

Photographing every day life in North Korea for my project was conducted under the strict supervision and control of three people designated by the regime. Almost 80% of my pictures were taken in secret using several methods. Trying not to draw the attention of my guides, acting and feeling like a “spy”, using my camera’s self timer and mostly shooting without looking at the viewfinder, even from inside a bus or a train, I managed to catch the mood of the country and little by little I collected enough material to form a project.
Every night I downloaded my pictures to my mp3 player hidden from my roommate under my bed sheets.

In DPRK photographic and video equipment are very restricted. Professional cameras are not allowed, nor lenses over 150mm, video cameras, computers and mobile phones. So I had two small cameras, one digital and one analog, both functioning very silently, usually hidden in my bag. I was permitted to take them out only at sightseeing locations, though, even in front of the Great Leader statue, where we were obliged to bow, a guide instructed me: "When you take photographs of the statue of Kim Il-Sung you must include it in all one picture, no side pictures, no pictures from behind".

Meanwhile, the West accuses North Korea of being a repressive and authoritarian regime. According to Korean officials however, people perceive the high level of discipline as a defense against threats from the outside world and a means to build a strong country based on the ideological direction of Kimilsungism. Reports on human rights abuses, labour camps, political prisoner camps, executions and tortures are multiplied yearly. It is the only country to conduct experiments on humans with drugs or gases, says Soon Ok Lee who was imprisoned in a labour camp for seven years.⁸ We have proof from a number of eyewitnesses that the North Korean regime is testing chemical weapons on political prisoners in gas chambers, says Suzan Scholte, a representative of the American NGO Alliance for North Korea.⁹

The 1996 famine, which resulted in the death of more than 3 million people, as well as the constant reports of malnutrition and human rights violations have not been enough to draw the attention of the international community. Today the demilitarized zone on the border between North and South remains one of the hottest spots on the planet. According to analysts, the so-called DMZ between the communist North and the non-communist South is the most

⁸ See Warzone Documentaries 30-11-2005, Mega Channel
⁹ Ibid.
likely spot for the eruption of a new war.\textsuperscript{10}

3.2 Changing social landscape – Democratic People’s Republic of Korea 1950-2008

As the world focuses again on North Korea, it is useful to look at that country and its people afresh. Since the aim of my case study is to document how context interacts with the photojournalist’s situational work, it is important to see how contemporary photographers capture the images of the country. In addition, how does censorship and difficulty of access experienced in the specific regime affect their work? By cross-examining their projects with mine I can shed new light on my own work, in the two distinct periods of my project [before and during my PhD research], thus I can actually record and document my shift to a more aesthetic or art-based approach to North Korea and see how this interacts with the difficulty of access and censorship.

North Korea remains quiet and insulated despite the worldwide media coverage that greeted the recent hostilities with the South, as well as the rocket launch crisis and the never-ending stories about the communist state’s nuclear weapons program. Few photographers have had the freedom to enter the impoverished totalitarian society in an attempt to unravel the major riddle of Asia, which makes the exhibition \textit{Changing social landscape – Democratic People’s Republic of Korea 1950-2008} at Gongpyeong Gallery in Jongno District, central Seoul, in 2008, all the more important.

\textit{Changing Social Landscape} contains 70 pictures by nine photographers from different fields who visited the North to capture the land through their lenses over the last six decades. This chapter especially focuses on the work by Margaret Bourke-White, Chris Marker and Seok Insaeng. Since one of my aims, in Chapters One, Two and Three, is to draw on the experience of the work of such professionals, I need to examine more closely the main

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.
principles that these works have to comply with and the major axes on which we can trace common characteristics or differences between them. It is important to focus on the work of those photographers who have managed to depict Korean scenes through time.

One of the most well-known photographers whose work was on display in the exhibition was the pioneering photojournalist Margaret Bourke-White (see figure 14). During the 1950s, she traveled into the North and produced extraordinary black-and-white images of North Korean people after the Korean War (1950-1953). French documentary filmmaker Chris Marker undertook a similar trip during that period. Another photographer, Seok Imsaeng, who worked as a photographer at Korea Hydro and Nuclear Power Co., went to the North in 1997 as part of the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization program. Seok Imsaeng stayed in the North for seven years until he returned to the South in 2004. His photos depict peaceful landscapes of mountains, villages and fields, which seem no different from South Korea’s countryside at first glance (Lee, 2008).
The curator Lim Young Kyun said he wanted to show that North Korea has changed but only very slowly, almost not at all. In his personal view, the two Koreas will reunite as time passes. 'From the perspective of global history, all divided countries are united again,' he commented. 'This process repeats itself over and over again' (ibid.).

According to the exhibition's curator, Lim Young Kyun, (2008), Korea, currently the only divided nation on earth, may become unified in the 21st century. He wanted to go to North Korea to meet his fellow countrymen and take a look at the mountains and rivers of the North. But permission to visit North Korea is very limited to South Koreans. He says:

'People like me have more difficulties and disadvantages than foreigners with Chinese or English nationality when we try to visit. Why is that? I am an outsider in the complex and diverse world of politics. My only wish is that one nation, i.e., South Korea and North Korea, does not become the victim of international policy' (ibid. p.7-8).

Bruce Cumings (2008, p.11) believes that 'The collection includes not simply a number of fascinating photographs of North Korea, but is a collection done by a handful of the world's best photographers.' Bruce Cumings feels that Margaret Bourke-White's pictures during the Korean War in 1950s show a traditional agrarian society, which values Confucianism. Chris Marker, the first to visit North Korea after the appearance of the Military Demarcation Line between the South and North, captures authority as well as respect (ibid. p.12-13).

The Korean War is almost forgotten in the USA: almost everything to do with this war is buried history. It took years of reading to find out that the intrepid woman journalist Margaret Bourke-White had her camera-eye trained on the unconventional in Korea, literally the "unconventional" guerrilla war in the South. While many of Margaret Bourke-White's photos were published in Life magazine, her pictures from Korea were never published in the biggest and more prestigious magazine for photographers in the world.
Margaret Bourke-White’s phrase, “My life and career was not an accident” is not at all accidental: as founding member of *Fortune* magazine and the first female photographer for *Life* magazine, she is a legendary person who started a new era in photojournalism. Her photo *Fort Peck Dam* was the cover of the first issue of *Life* magazine in 1936. Starting with the Soviet-German War when it broke out in 1941 as the German forces first dropped their bombs in Moscow, she later became the first female war correspondent to fly in a bomber during World War II, taking pictures of the battlefront of America, Africa and Europe. In 1950, she photographed racial discrimination in South Africa. She got to know Korea while she recorded the Korean War in 1952. She spent her whole life in battlefields, but when you look at her photos of North Korea taken at the time of the Korean War, you can actually see peaceful country people. It’s impossible to imagine the miserable state of war just by looking at the North Korean people in them; all you can see is their broad smile (Park, 2008 p.20).

Similar elements of humanist and photojournalist imagery can be traced in Chris Marker’s work. He is well known for experimenting with various genres: a theoretician, screenwriter, photographer, film director, and documentary maker. He studied philosophy under Jean-Paul Sartre and started making experimental films in 1952. As a master of *Cinema Verité*, he created a different tradition from the contemporary French new wave movement and is constantly extending the field of new possibilities in production techniques and film contents. His filmography includes *Lettre de Sibérie* (1957), *La Jetée* (1963), *Le joli mai* (1963) and *Sans Soleil* (1983).

Marker offered the classic book *Coréennes* (2008) in the exhibition. Focusing on daily life he presents us with stoic and uncommonly handsome people, somehow thriving in the midst of an awful destruction: men and women dancing to accordions in a public park, some rakish and arresting, like a man observing reconstruction work with an insouciant air. The women drive trucks
and make steel, but also dote on their babies or cast subtle glances toward the camera; one has her baby tied to her back with timeworn blankets, while looking at a poster announcing the success of the Soviet Sputnik.

Marker's still photography opens a new window on history, a new interaction with history. His visual meaning is inextricable from the sequence of his images' flow, but also distorts the meaning of the individual frame (the basis of the still): the still photo, however, distorts the meaning of the editor, "who is the historian of filmic evidence" (ibid. p.12).

"His pictures show social aspects through people and landscape immediately after the Korean War. Though the photos are taken by a French man, they do not feel alien. He had plenty of background information about the postwar society of North Korea, and recorded what he saw with respect, while staying neutral" (Nam and Lim, 2008 p.26). By focusing on human values and concerns he has managed to gain this sense of familiarity that his critics describe.

Another photographer, who seems to share similar values when covering North Korea, is the South Korean Seok Imsaeng, born in 1952 in Changnyeong, Kyungnam. He has won prizes or been selected for exhibitions for more than 40 times. He worked at the construction site of the light water reactor at Shinpo, North Korea as a photographer in the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) from 1997 to 2004, when he saw the famine known as "Arduous March" and the chaos in the people's daily lives. He came to the conclusion that it was simply wrong to neglect the grim situation and decided to publicize the life of the North Korean compatriots to South Korean people for the sake of history and society. Since then, he consistently recorded the daily life of North Koreans. Seok Imsaeng vividly recorded the rural areas and cities, the sights of nature, the daily life of North Koreans-things we did not know before - while he stayed in North Korea for about 10 years, regardless of the severe surveillance and regulation (Kim, H.
In his exhibited work he states ‘The North Korean people in the photos might lead a hard life and live at a distance from us, but nevertheless are our kind neighbors. Although I had to work in restricted places, you can observe the genuine life of the people “appearing” in my photographs.’ (Bourke-White et al. 2008). His humanism seems to convey a felt sense of social justice, especially important if we consider his origin.

Turning now to my own work, it has been said that it ‘exudes a dark, underlying humour that is not a million miles from the humour that imbues the writings of Kafka or the paintings of Surrealists like Magritte’ (Moutsopoulos, 2007, p.9). When I first visited North Korea, already an experienced war photojournalist, I had in mind the motto “be close – be fast – be lucky; easy; always remember – be humane, never close-ups of the dead, war is in the eyes” (Duncan, 2003, p.151). I could dare say that I share with Margaret Bourke-White, Chris Marker and Seok ImSaeng this “humane” responsibility – and I think that exactly this is in the core of my first approach to all ethical questions that I had to face when covering the suffering victims of atrocities. However, during my visits to this extraordinary country, especially as I was now attempting to verbalize my views, which were expressed only through images before, but that now had taken up a different kind of “voice” by means of my doctorate thesis, I felt that something started changing in my work. It is not that I had stopped caring about people – on the contrary. It is rather that I had started being interested in an additional intellectual quality that such work of mine could encompass another way to affirm my ability and responsibility to lead an “ethical” professional life: ideology.

3.3 Ideology driven approaches

A different, though still positive attitude towards the world, again centered on human experience, thought, and hopes, but through a rather different filter,
namely, an ideological and aesthetic filter, is the work of Charlie Crane, Philippe Chancel and Andreas Gursky. Yet, this is not the only difference in their approach: what is most characteristic in the work of these three eminent creators is their emphasis on form, to such a degree, in certain cases, that they might choose to undermine content in order to elevate their concepts of form.

Openly prioritizing form over content was never the issue for me, and this cannot change, since I always remain faithful to the humanist photojournalistic qualities, as these are typified in the work by Margaret Bourke White, Chris Marker and Seok Imsaeng.

This difference of mine is clear in the comparison between my two projects of North Korea. During my second visit I was significantly influenced by my doctoral research and I had already started reconsidering certain opinions, which regard the utopian effort of the photographer's "close encounter" to the event. Taking the decision, then, that physical approach was by default constrained, due to the inevitable, physical and realistic restrictions, I started digressing from the (already inhospitable) subject matter and I began rather implying, indicating and suggesting what happened around me —since revealing the true facts was futile.

Charlie Crane had to wait for one whole year to cover "this secretive country." He recalls the stiff, robot-like attendants in Pyongyang when he finally entered the country, and how he became friends with them in a few days by using his Polaroid camera.

The scenes in his photos are very tidy and the characters look rigid. He places people in their extremely formal clothes and gestures right in the middle of the frame and points his camera straight to the front without any distortions. We feel an illusion as we stand face to face with them. The impression the characters make with their firmly closed lips and fixed gazes is so strong that
it's hard to turn away. They stand still on the spot, enduring the silence. We can sense his unique style as an advertising photographer, different from the documentary photographers who work under the responsibility that they have to convey the facts of an event (Park, 2008 p.92).

Charlie Crane's large-format portraits and landscapes is a pastiche 'guide' to North Korea's capital. Martin Parr (Bainbridge, 2006 p.32) says about Crane's *Welcome to Pyongyang* book 'The great thing about his images is that they are done with the full consent of both the authorities and the subjects. They are calm and poignant; a most refreshing take on this strange isolated country.'

Looking through his book, we instantly realize that Charlie Crane fully embraced North Korean compromises: accompanied by official guides at all times, he adopted remote neutrality, leaving viewers to draw their own conclusions. The photographs' formality can be viewed as propaganda in service of North Korean tourism, or something altogether more chilling.

According to Chris Boot, the publisher of *Welcome to Pyongyang*, the terms of publishing the book included ensuring that it shouldn't upset the North Korean regime: '[...] in the end the challenge of making a book which presented Pyongyang on its own terms, to be deemed acceptable by Pyongyang officials as a suitably respectful representation of the city, which at the same time satisfied the criteria of photographer-artist and independent photo art publisher, became central to the appeal of publishing it' (ibid.).

While it is true that the book layout and structure is meant to be presented to foreigners as an expression of ideology Boot also makes a point about photography itself here. 'There's a tendency to want to consider photographs either as propaganda – whether commercial or ideological – or as 'truth', as if

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11 Charlie Crane's *Welcome to Pyongyang* is the winner of British Journal of Photography's Photographic Award 2006.
the choice is always one or the other.' But he admits that nearly all published photographs are a mixture of both and they are always propagandistic because an idea, a product, a version of events is being sold (ibid.)

On the other hand, French portrait artist Philippe Chancel managed to convince Kim Jong Il's regime in Pyongyang that he was only interested in North Korea's aesthetic and not political views. Instead of using his three visits to depict the starving population, he opted for a clinical look (similar to Charlie Crane's work) at how the state manages its image internally. His remote but sophisticated approach explores how the political has been transfigured into an all-encompassing aesthetic (Poivert, 2006, pp.5-14). He shows us the huge empty avenues of Pyongyang, the Children's Palace, and the gigantic May Day Stadium, seating up to 150,000 people, a remarkable scenography of a uniquely chilling reality.

In his medium format pictures, Philippe Chancel uses the government's ostentatious propaganda to bring out the grey desolation lurking behind it. Next to the mass gatherings of thousands of spectators who render mosaics of national symbols or pictures of Kim Jong Il by holding up painted placards in unison, he reveals an alarming sense of desolation. His images of Pyongyang offer no evidence of individuality, or local social life. Instead, his photographs glorify the reign of Kim Il-Sung and his son, the "Dear Leader": 'the leaders, with their shining white teeth and frozen smiles, look more suited for a toothpaste ad than national leadership' (Spiegel, 2006). On the other hand, his photographs seem cold and sterile, maintaining a subliminal humanist strain, which redeems them; but then he falls into the trap of embellishment of exotic Asian women, loosing his political message.

An example of the form intensive approach, the pictures by the German photographer Andreas Gursky are unusual in every respect. Most remarkable is their unconventional huge scale ranging up to 2 x 5 metres. His projects reach proportions that we know only from advertising; actually, they advertise
his most precise look at the world. He places his camera high above, far away, even more distant than the other representatives of the aesthetic trend. He also goes further than reality. His pictures often entail multiple views of the same subject, different subjects seamlessly sliced together, while he applies digital manipulation in post production. He prefers ordered spaces and repeating grids. In his series on North Korea’s annual Arirang Festival, where 80,000 gymnasts perform choreographed routines to entertain 50,000 rapturous spectators you stare at this monumentally large sea of humans and you can notice shoelaces and smiles. It is hard to distinguish the individual in his pictures, as everyone is part of a multitude while very often he digitally pieces together numerous shots from various locations, including his studio.

Shooting North Korea’s Arirang Festival on a 5in x 7in large-format camera, before scanning his negatives to work on them digitally in his studio, Andreas Gursky admits he found the rapidly changing gymnastic displays hard to capture smoothly. Although he originally had permission to shoot for one evening, he attended seven shows in September 2005, and made a second visit a month later to get more of the shots he needed. He was granted access due to his popularity and he only focused on the Arirang festival, as if the entire country was of no interest of him.

Andreas Gursky’s photographs are neither documentary nor do they belong to the aftermath kind, which we have discussed in previous chapters. He constructs pictures using photographs taken of real places and situations. He digitally manipulates his images –by combining discrete views of the same subject, by deleting “inappropriate” details, by enhancing colors— to create a kind of “assisted realism”.

The “reality” that Andreas Gursky wants to show through his “creation”, is not the “deeper reality” that goes hidden behind the visible surface of appearance; rather it is a reality still more superficial, if this could ever be possible, than what is noticeable: it is ‘so mercilessly visible that there is no longer anything to see at all’. (Gursky, 2001).
He works with digital post-processing, which unsettles the viewer, though many of the alterations he achieves are impossible to discern from reality. His photography testifies to great technical mastery. Beyond any doubt he is a master of contemporary photography. His constructed images do not borrow their power from the appearance of the real world that they depict, but rather from a self-created and self-contained world: the world of art. Andreas Gursky has introduced the idea that a photographer can make or construct — rather than simply take — photographs about modern life and produce them on the scale of museum painting. Similar to great painters of the past, who found their subjects in the realities of everyday life, he seeks inspiration in his observations of the human kind around the world.

Furthermore, he does not hesitate to remove unwanted elements from his photos. It is obvious with Andreas Gursky that digital manipulation is more than cleaning up the image. His technique is far beyond Philippe Chancel's simple enhancement of the images, which does not deviate so much from photojournalism's ethical code. Almost all documentary content is completely banned from the image, to the extent that his pictures look more like mere two-dimensional designs. His subjects lend themselves to his mastery, for him to realise this technological potential. "I never claim the picture is a depiction of reality," says Andreas Gursky. "It's always a combination of invention and reality, an interpretation of reality." (ibid.).

In his case it is technology that determines content. We deal here with a sovereign (re)construction of reality, rather than with the "documentary" reproduction of it. Andreas Gursky is not interested in the "authentic photo" at all. For him the sense of reality conveyed by his imagery is the result of constructing an image. He shows us the world not as it is, but as he sees it — as he wants and as he chooses to see it. As a matter of fact, his view of the world seems to be a very proficient one, if we consider that his pictures are being sold in auctions for millions of dollars! He works as a film director: by condensing documentary footage during the editing process and by
manipulating it according to his personal conceptions, he manages, somehow, to actually increase and enhance the resulting picture's authenticity. (Schmidt-Garre, 2007, p.108).

‘Andreas Gursky’s handsome images of trading floors, hotel lobbies, raves, and landscapes [are] charged with a visual force and intellectual rigor that let you imagine that you were gleaning the grand schemes and invisible rhythms of commerce and consumption.’ (Saltz, 2007). As he puts it, “My preference for clear structures is the result of my desire -perhaps illusory- to keep track of things and maintain my grip on the world.” He’s especially distant when he portrays people. “I am never interested in the individual,” he says, coolly, “but in the human species and its environment.” (ibid.).

In his photos capturing the mass spectacle of the Arirang festival in Pyongyang (a 'minimalist arrangement of lines' according to Schlüter) (2007) the elements are homogenised and presented in geometric patterns. For his photos in Pyongyang Andreas Gursky needed some hundred exposures in order to make his single image: digital manipulation in that respect was rendered obsolete by means of massive manipulations. For these enormous mosaics he used 100 ASA film in two large-format Linhof cameras that were positioned side by side, one with a slight wide-angle lens, the other with a standard one. In the process, various chronological phases of the performance are combined together, while all irritating elements are removed or any occasional blurred movement is discarded. The adoption of a bird’s-eye view is combined with the opposite move: zooming in to the tiniest detail.

Gursky’s use of the large-format invites certain readings, but these, as Stefan Beyst has argued, can be misleading: ‘Large format also suggests that we are dealing with something very important […] many authors are searching a deeper meaning behind Andreas Gursky's decorative wall-decoration that is no more than a demonstration of technical skill […] many authors are talking about ‘monumentality’ and of ‘epic scale’ - overlooking the fact that there is a
difference between literal size and intrinsic format: not all large images are monumental, and not all monumental works are large.' (Beyst, 2007).

'Gursky has moved away so far from the documentary, that we could also call him a pixel-painter.' (Schlüter, 2007). His method (the “condensation” of reality by means of recombining separate shots) reminds us of the painter’s technique, who composes his image from countless separate observations. To his own claim that his images are neutral (he argues that he neither idealises the country, nor does he criticises it) one could oppose the opinion that his images are not political at all —in the classical photojournalistic meaning of the term. It has been argued that the case of Andreas Gursky shows how the capitalistic market can defend itself successfully against such completed socialism (ibid.). The question remains whether Andreas Gursky is really interested in revealing to us any aspects of the political reality in North Korea, whether we can receive any political meaning at all, in his aesthetic contradiction.

Comparison of my work against that of Andreas Gursky can indicate a superficial similarity, due to our choice of subject matter. However, I believe that he selected North Korea for purely aesthetic reasons, since he actually focuses on a fragmented snapshot of the country, the Arirang festival. Indeed, the Arirang festival, both as a theme and as a spectacle, serves Andreas Gursky’s purposes, since it operates by itself as the perfect geometric pattern that the artist seeks in almost all his projects. In addition, one could say that this particular spectacle is so perfectly implemented that it does not need any other intervention — or at least it needs much fewer interventions than any other of the artist’s projects.

My own criterion to choose North Korea lies more on the particular historic interest of the country, the last model of a communist political and ideological system before its demise. The case of Arirang, though, certainly, impressive, was the least interesting for me to capture, since it constituted an orchestrated
fiesta totally staged by the regime. As I mentioned in Chapter One and also here above, by following a more objective path, I could never accept to manipulate reality – not of course to construct it. To manufacture pictures or to collaborate with the regime for promoting its image and profile goes against my photojournalistic code of ethics.

Furthermore, just by comparing the time needed to produce the final product of our two projects we can see that it is asymmetrical. Andreas Gursky devotes much more time during the post production process, while I devote most of my time in researching my subject matter and taking the picture itself. On the other hand, one could say that I focus on individuals, while Andreas Gursky shows us the human species and the environment. Finally, my approach seeks the image’s authenticity, which is in sharp contrast with the constructed image and the assisted reality produced by Andreas Gursky. (see figure 15).

Another experience photojournalist investigating the shifting and complex terrain between art, documentary and journalism is Philippe Chancel. The luscious 129 color photographs of his 2006 North Korea book, DPRK, provide a chilling and detached comment on the monumental political narcissism under which this country operates. In DPRK Philippe Chancel tries to capture the all encompassing aesthetic of communist ideology as well as the finely orchestrated details of the regime’s daily propaganda: his work is a rare
glimpse into a totalitarian state usually closed off to Western eyes—but, certainly, an obviously staged one. (see figure 16, Chancel et al. 2006).

Philippe Chancel’s aim is to take pictures that would be approved of by the state authorities and at the same time be respected by liberal opinions abroad. Maybe this is why he joins the artistic venture; but he makes us think about power and how it is represented, namely, whether and how much the political message is retained and conveyed. In a nutshell, one could argue that his detached focus becomes the ‘aestheticization of politics’. (Benjamin, 1979).

He creates distance in his clear but silent scenes. His settings and his whole work manages to express a particular kind of beauty, removed from any emotional entanglements. He seems to be mainly interested in the distinctive symbols of power, the cult of personality and its magnification. Thus many of his shots remind us of icons, not pictures: the main figure is set in the center of the image, with all others playing the role of the chorus, so to speak.
Technically this device draws attention to what is being singled out. At the same time, though, one might argue that the photographer also wants to imply the existence of people behind the orchestrated scene. However, many of his pictures seem bland and uninspiring. He is so meticulous in approaching contemporary art and in taking control of his work that he reaches the other extreme: his images seem to be totally dependent on the stylistic settings that become alienated from any reportage form, thus loosing the dynamics of his attempted expression. ‘Although these pictures are in the tradition of reportage and tell it like it is, the interpretation of them much depends on the viewer. To some, these subjects may seem like puppets on a string’. (Beyfus, 2007).

By choosing to confine his gaze to distinctive signs of power Philippe Chancel creates arranged photography. He has attempted to examine the concept of suggestion but he has created a body of work with such ambiguity that it loses its core dynamics. When all possible interpretations of a picture are equally strong, then the functional message, as utilized by the holders of power, prevails. On the surface, the views he offers us could very well be found in a DPRK government approved tourist catalog. Browsing through the pictures, in the beginning, the catalog seems attractive; after a while, the Kim Il-Sung and the Kim Jong Il imagery, the self-importance of the architecture and the compulsive sense of order start to take hold. From this point of view his work becomes a dispassionate study of the use of propaganda as a means of subjugation and control.

When examining different kinds of photography, we should firstly address the issue of genre. What do we have here: an investigation, a report, a traveller's guide, a representation of a personal quest? Michel Poivert in his essay ‘Appearances’ about Philippe Chancel's book admits that ‘although it is quite explicitly a photographer's book, it does not form part of the modern drift towards the genre of historical photography that feeds on the ambivalence between the fine arts and news media - that apparent dialectic which has
He continues 'The rhetoric of modern photography is founded on the commonplace and on detachment from every 'subject' in the classic or journalistic sense of the word - whether the aim is to affirm the autonomy of the image or to fulfil a critical intent.' (Poivert, 2006, p.11)

Certainly, his approach is aesthetic and his rhetoric is anti-totalitarian. And, indeed, one might argue that modern photography's rhetoric is founded on the commonplace, on detachment from every "subject" in the journalistic meaning of the work. However, in my opinion, detachment should never lead to isolation from any ideology, especially when we are photographing ideology! To avoid taking positions is an act of balancing distances by employing the criterion of (political) judgement; it is difficult to be neutral and express opinion at the same time; it is easy to slip off the rope and draw on the authority of the image.

Philippe Chancel himself characterised his pictures as 'simple, neutral with no pathos or drama'. He recalled, 'From their point of view I was on their side.' So he focused on the public aspect, depicting the big assemblies, street scenes showing state monuments, hotels and museums, children's group activities, and essentially on the ubiquitous image of the dictator Kim Jong-il. (Beyfus, 2007).

Philippe Chancel's iconography, rather than photography, wishing to go beyond the operative bounds of information and to become a cultural object in itself, expresses in an excellent way the "aesthetization of photojournalism". Here the question of the "subject" is frequently reduced to a matter of categorization of current affairs, to the circumstantial reference of a certain "reality" which only serves the purpose of becoming "Great Art". What are the ethics, though, of such approaches? What is the purpose of Philippe Chancel when he combines the aesthetics of neo-Stalinist pomp with the elegant and soft reshaping of the human body on an individual scale? How is beauty
incorporated into a world of horror? Behind all technicalites and poses, is pain becoming a tourist attraction in itself? ‘What better way of conveying their menace than by showing their tendency to become tourist attractions? What better way of approaching this reality, which has constructed its own sham realities, than by making [it] indistinguishable from postmodernism?’ (Poivert, 2006, p.14).

Although similar restraints are imposed on both of us, freedom of action and the corresponding means both I and Philippe Chancel had in dealing with North Korea, were different: he had obviously more freedom since he could spend enough time on location in shooting his subjects. Of course, freedom in its own terms, since, in both cases, upon arrival at Pyongyang airport, a devoted worker of the state’s machine trained a video camera on us; the message was clearly conveyed: the observers are going to be observed.

But differences are not found only in terms of freedom of movement and use of means. Philippe Chancel tends to amplify the political aesthetics of North Korean communism. I tend to reveal those that are not supposed to be revealed. Indeed, we both cracked the bureaucracy involved in getting into the country. However, I never thought of the official way to be the only possible option.

Moreover, we both end with the same realization: yes, the ‘socialist realism’ murals that we both photograph –and how couldn’t we do so– with the absurdly happy looking workers beaming at their glorious future in the middle distance are just propaganda pictures; but, after all, they aren’t that different from the corporate adverts that we are facing every day, with their promises of instant fulfilment if only we buy a cool gadget, a deodorant or a new sofa.

Aggeliki Kounava in her comparative study examining my published work against that of Phillippe Chancel’s argues that while our body of work can be essentially classified into two different realms –Journalism and Art- actually
one overlaps with the other. 'Both [photographers] have exhibited their pictures in galleries and museums, namely in artistic organizations. This fact shows that, for example, the images by Yannis Kontos have been recognized as images of art. In a similar way, while Philippe Chancel is considered an artist, his pictures do provide us with information and they speak about his testimony, his own personal view upon this country. Thus we can support that there is indeed a journalistic aspect in his creation too.' (Kounava, 2008).

Furthermore, the relation between the photographer and the subject are very different between us. ‘Figures [in Philippe Chancel's work] seem to pose before the camera. His subjects know that they are being photographed; they accept the presence of the photographer. Thus, sometimes their posture becomes "frozen" or rather theatrical. On the contrary, in most of Yannis Kontos' pictures the subjects are not aware of the photographic act...’ as Aggeliki Kounava noted. However, it is part of a professional photographers's "socialization" to overcome reluctance to photograph even in the face of grief or threat (conditions routinely encountered by photojournalists). According to Lisa Henderson ‘Among fellow professionals, it is a sign of competence and reliability to be able to get pictures regardless of the circumstances, an ability seasoned photographers are assumed to possess and novices are rewarded for acquiring’. (2003; cited in Wells, p.275).

It is obvious that if a country so strictly concerned about the image it shows to the external world, whenever it finally gives some photographer the permission to take pictures, the image that shall reach outwards is idealized. Personally, I was never interested in doing so. Certainly, mine is a totally different approach, an absolutely distinct strategy. Philippe Chancel photographs with a medium format camera, with tripod; his frames are impeccable, his view is totally clinical, his takes are very good, lighting is always immaculate. Of course, he has all the time to work, he is under no pressure by anyone, he does not have the anxiety of being caught, arrested, sent to prison, being charged of espionage, being expelled from the country.
His approach is distinct, rather visual, and very significant for the international bibliography – but my own views are utterly opposite to his. Philippe Chancel’s images are embellished to the degree that reminded me of Hollywood pictures or Disneyland pictures... I consider that documentary photography should incorporate truth and information to the largest possible degree. I believe that my work, as a whole, does create a “collective image” of North Korea, does unveil the universe of this country. As a consequence, I want my photographs to have the value of evidence, the worth of a testimony.

To summarize, I believe that it is necessary to differentiate between two kinds of photographers in terms of both aesthetics and ideology; I think it is obvious that the photographers I hereby present can be classified in two categories, according to the manner they have chosen to approach their subject.

The first category includes most of the photographers: they are the so-called “realistic” photojournalists, namely the ones who serve the journalistic point of view and thus they obey the code of ethics imposed by their profession, acting and thinking in a rather conventional way. The second category introduces a rather modern version of photographic evidence, where photographers clearly choose to keep a distance from their subject, by using cumbersome and slow devices, by avoiding to come into close contact with the, anyway, remote reality, though they do emphasize its aesthetic representation.

Margaret Bourke-White, Chris Marker and Seok Imsaeng by denying any sense of propaganda in their work and by choosing the “tough way” of classical evidence have utilized various ruses (technical and organizational) in order to achieve their goal, despite the incredible limitations that the North Korean regime imposes. Acting under conditions of absolute control and running the risk of being considered spies, they managed one way or another, to shed light on realistic evidence that testifies to the status quo in North Korea. From Margaret Bourke-White to Seok Imsaeng all photos seem to construct the puzzle of the most enigmatic and remote country in the world.
These pictures are important because they constitute the very few records we have from North Korea. The work by Margaret Bourke-White and Chris Marker shows that the value of such pictures is further enhanced in the course of time.

On the other hand, Charlie Crane, Philippe Chancel and Andreas Gursky, acting on purely aesthetic criteria are in absolute compromise with the regime's orders (or with its official permit). Relieved from any controls and psychological constraints, such photographers have created images of high aesthetic qualities, approaching or even surmounting the borders of propaganda material. The point with aesthetics is that although it does offer a neutral, pure and polished view, in the case of North Korea it exemplifies the absence of any kind of political irony or derision of the regime (the classical photojournalistic approach) while collaboration with the authorities erases any sense of objectivity. All three mirror the ideology of aesthetics and they seem to be indifferent for their concord with the regime. In the name of beauty and embellishment, dazzled by the majestic representations they essentially extol the propaganda of a totalitarian regime, falling into the trap of the exotic idealized image. This image, though approved by the North Korean regime, is of the least interest to the media and photojournalists.

The “realistic” photojournalists, trained in hostile environments, frequently having risked their own life, cannot accept the lack of physical risk and the psychological limitations (continuous supervision) that the North Korean regime imposes on them. Maybe this is the only time that they have been “invited” to function within an absolutely “pure” and sanitized context with a perfect “urban plan” of people and buildings. The lack of visual noise, in an almost idealistic digital graphic environment facilitates the composition of images, while the huge architectural monuments of the city, in contradiction to human miniatures, create an easy clash of magnitudes. The price of psychological urge becomes obvious if we compare their pictures from North Korea against the rest of their production. Their photos, often exasperatingly
remote, intensely reveal their disorientation from their initial target. For such photographers North Korea remains an inhospitable paradise.

But, why is it that North Korea is important after all? It is worthy to note here that another fundamental difference between the two classes is the selection criterion of the particular environment. The photojournalists select North Korea as the Communism's Last Frontier, the most introvert, mysterious and less photographed country in the world. The postmodernists select the country for its exotic, eerie aesthetics, its clearly structured environment that can offer decorative views, the leaders' cult figures and the nostalgic feelings of socialist realism, which nowadays seem to become all the more popular again.
Chapter Four

Beyond Photojournalism

In this final chapter I juxtapose my last project in North Korea against my project in Malaysia to examine the role of the environment and the contextual restrictions in the approaches and techniques that are feasible, in order to set the field for positioning my work into another level. 12

Having been working for more than 18 years in both war and peace zones, all over the world, I felt the need to evaluate what I had been doing and to move beyond photojournalism, not necessarily in order to enter into the world of art - since my photographs are already hanging on museum and gallery walls- but in order to reach an additional audience, which I think by itself is an important merit. At this point I should say that the maturity that I have gained through my years of experience facilitates me to carry my work into another level. Exactly as Andy Grundberg puts it, my work involves ‘[...] a desire for the photojournalist to have credence as a creative photographer, with books and galleries providing the context as the number of news magazines willing to run photo essays declined’ (1990, p.190).

Despite the modern digital means, which propel the photographer to take more and more pictures all the time, I decided to use a medium or large format analog camera, thus minimizing the number of takes and giving myself more time to reflect, before, during and after the shooting. Liberated from the media’s continuous pressure I lost my interest in depicting the continuously duplicated obvious facts and I considered it more important to stress the what is implied rather than the what is revealed by my pictures. This was a need to change and a necessity for an internal quest; a lonely path with significantly lower pressure and competition levels.

12 This is to be seen in relation to my book Beyond Photojournalism 2011, submitted as part of my PhD.
By magnifying the result (namely, the final picture) I believe that I manage to become a narrator, by giving the audience the input, the inspiration and the space to investigate—and interpret—the picture. I think that in this passage I have been largely assisted by my doctoral thesis and by the comparison of my work against that of photographers like Simon Norfolk and Philippe Chancel, in whose work I had the opportunity to observe particular similarities and differences with my own in terms of subject matter.

My personal photography work from North Korea is balanced between being a documentary and being a work of art. My initial intention, when merely pursuing my professional objectives, was to follow the doctrine of classical “realistic” depiction, which is exactly what I actually did during my first two visits. Finding myself at a crossroads in my photographic career in my third visit, I decided to act in a more unconnected manner, moving towards the second category of photographers that I already examined in the previous chapters; this is why I opted for a large format camera (though, finally, the usage of it proved to be unfeasible, due to the unescapable restrictions I had to handle), aiming at expressing a political commentary, without though hunting only after pictures that would reveal “the evils” of the regime. However, on the other hand, the ethics of the profession that I have served for more than 18 years did not allow me to do any favour to the regime.

Reiteration in recording facts with similar characteristics and under comparable circumstances all the time can psychologically drain even the photojournalists themselves. Maybe an overall turn is necessary in the profession. A lot of photojournalists, like me, understand, after certain years of work, that the situations that we depict are essentially duplicating identical facts, which are repeated at a very high degree of prediction.

Continuous exposure to violence may bring about the opposite results: ‘[...] seeing does not necessarily translate into believing, caring or acting.’ (Linfield,
2010 p.40). Indeed, rather frequently, depiction of violence might not even carry any political message at all. Moreover, by showing to the world only uninhabitable and destroyed sites photojournalists have stretched out—and stressed out—our perception of what human beings are able to do to each other; however, many times this enhanced knowledge leaves no space for emotions—even some initial grief, surprise, fear or disgust finally retreats and leaves no trace on the memory at all.

As a matter of fact, a lot of critics have actually attacked the “trade” of extremely powerful images—sometimes even inconceivable—of human suffering that photojournalists have surrendered to; many objections have been expressed against the commercialization of representations of pain, to the degree that certain critics have accused such professionals producing such visual documents of “pornography”. This can be traced, in part, to a 1978 essay on documentary photography in which Allan Sekula derided what he called "the pornography of the 'direct' representation of misery." (Quoted in Linfield, ibid.). And, surprisingly enough, it is sometimes the very photographers who have worked hardest and most consciously to avoid objectifying their subjects who are fiercely derided as pornographers and exploiters, as for example James Nachtwey and Sebastião Salgado. Another charge against such photojournalists has been that they have been bombarding all of us with those images of pain with the aim to anesthetize us. However, this argument cannot be held true at all, since it goes without saying that people care only for those familiar to them, and photographic documentation has been exactly the means of familiarizing all of us with the suffering of all those others.

‘This, then, is the catch-22 into which photojournalists are thrust today. Some are criticized for taking too beautiful pictures, while others are chided for images that are too ugly to bear; some are criticized for a gruesome realism, while others are accused of being overly romantic in their approach.’ (ibid. p.44).
So, one wonders, why not then set out to beautify on purpose? Why not then stop photographing suffering?

Repeated friction with danger as well as the personal processes that every photojournalist undergoes during his/her work cannot but urge him/her to seek other types of approaches. Geert Van Kesteren's *Baghdad Calling*, which I examined in Chapter Two, is one of such examples, a "liberated" type of work, with a more subjective artistic approach.

By choosing, in my turn, to unhook my own work from the profession's restrictions at the war zones I searched for different subjects, initially in North Korea and then in Malaysia. My last trip to North Korea was the pretext for a smooth transfer Beyond Photojournalism. My last work in this country has significant differences from the previous ones, mainly in terms of aesthetics but also in the way of approaching my subject. Still based on humanistic principles one can now see a continuation with, not a rupture from, my previous work at Iraq.

Distance from the subject gives space for freedom in the way of thinking and acting, while at the same time it facilitates a wiser selection of both the subject and the composition. Without the peremptory necessity of photojournalism's traditional mandate to act "passionately" I can now perceive the whole reality around me in a completely different way and I realize that I now observe things that before I could not – or at least things that I just used to evaluate as unworthy to be recorded.

**4.1 Asian Consumerism**

Searching for a far more unconfined approach, and this time totally free from the physical restrictions of a hostile environment, like North Korea, I decided to turn my research towards an entirely different country of South-Eastern
Asia: Malaysia. Taking Asian rampant consumerism as my reference point, and as a paradox to be examined, I managed to distinguish both similarities and contradictions between these two absolutely contrasting countries.

As in all countries where capitalism has been imported and established without any historical maturation of the people's attitudes and mentalities, and particularly in the current context of global economics, one wonders what the long-term social and psychological impacts shall be on the Asian people. In fact, while consumerism has indeed created a nouveau middle class, however, very small portions of the society have actually benefited from this economic prosperity. Notwithstanding, the desire for material manifestations of comfort and wealth is spread right through the whole society. (Pettifor, 2002).

Especially during the 1980s and 1990s constructions boomed across several Asian countries decorating their cities and towns with gleaming office towers and super-size all encompassing shopping malls for all. Outrageously expensive imported luxury items became the new signs of status and consumerism soon went out of every control. The economic blow of 1997 expelled a lot of Asian countries —including Malaysia— to the realms of recession. (ibid.).

The ideological differences between Malaysia and North Korea constitute their fundamental visual controversies. Impetuous capitalism on the one hand and the remnants of anachronistic communist structures on the other make the two countries radically discrete. Differentiation is so obvious that one could wonder: where does reality end and illusion begin?

The main monuments of the North Korean regime have no relation to the famous Malaysian Petronas Towers; (see figure 17 & 18, pp.12-13). The multi-coloured Social Realist style posters totally contrast with Michael Schumacher's advertisements; (see figure 19 & 20, pp.14-15). Pyongyang's
empty streets pale away before the bustling and vibrant roads of Kuala Lumpur; the colorless, cold and sterile image of the one abruptly contrasts with the colourful and abundant visual noise of globalized consumerism. Self-sufficiency of rudimentary goods compares against the insipid exaggeration of offerings and extreme consumerism. The blank inhabitants of the Korean capital city are fundamentally dissimilar to the superficially happy and disoriented inhabitants of the Malaysian capital. (see figure 21, p.63). As Thanassis Moutsopoulos states in his *Introduction to a land beyond logic* '[...] their drama is not necessarily any worse than ours, crushed beneath the deadweight of the media, advertising, the rat race, consumerism; of a life largely thrown away on the most superficial and insubstantial concerns.' (2007, p.9).

However there are commonalities beneath the mask of ideologies, capitalism or communism. The human dimension remains, as always, the core of my work. Humanism always constitutes the fundamental principle of my work. The degree of suffering does not make any difference; the human condition in modern history is just the beginning. Authenticity and the ways to make a picture objective are things significantly important for me; thus I could never adopt another approach, as for example the constructed reality of Andreas Gursky. Similarities in terms of subject matter are of course obvious and cannot go unobserved for a photographer. However, exaggeration of scale, as the means of promoting an image to the eyes of the Western world, is just one thing; the presence of certain symbols and kitsch is another. (see figure 22, p.75).

Desperately hoping for economic revival, Malaysia today suffers from the so-called "Western commercial imperialism" while it goes through a period of absolute uncertainty over the lasting affects of globalization. From a journalistic point of view, one could argue that Malaysia’s consumerism is not as dramatic –though indeed exotic- as the North Korean challenge; however I think the country is an appropriate field for documentary photography as
multiple political and social issues are captured through the photographer’s critical eye.

Taking pictures in Malaysia is more than normal - though it is a Muslim country which struggles to impose its Islamic restraints - and photography is not considered as a kind of aggression. One could feel the freedom to photograph almost anything that comes into one’s mind and eye, under fewer obstructions than even in the Western world. People in Malaysia are rather friendly and seem to be familiarized with photography and thus are easily approachable, in contrast to the North Koreans, where communication is impossible, due to the constraints of the regime and the language.

Any Westerner would reasonably feel more comfortable in Malaysia than in North Korea, and especially an experienced photojournalist. While serving my profession in most of my assignments I have always felt as if I exercise a proscribed task, always with the “fear” of reactions - by the country’s regime or even its people. My work in Malaysia made me feel more as if I were on vacation than in a work environment. It was maybe the first time in my career that I could work under such conditions of absolute tolerance. Here I could “manage” the environment at my own will and this made the country a perfect setting for me to experiment with all the new approaches I had already started employing in North Korea.

I had now understood that when working beyond photojournalism contextual restrictions are not an issue any more - at least not to the degree that they used to be, since the purpose now is different: to express my personal (humanistic) vision, by suggesting my principles when pointing my camera, no matter the environment. In Malaysia I had the opportunity to try all kinds of distances, literally and metaphorically, from my subjects and to consciously apply aesthetic criteria in my shots. Photography, thus, turned into a willing employment rather than an imposed obligation.
Final remark – Conclusion

By examining the relation between photojournalism and art in Chapter One, through my experience as a war photographer, and at the same time by cross-examining my work against certain aspects of the Brighton Photo Biennial 2008, I attempted to justify my attitude and performance as a photojournalist who tends to embrace the aftermath movement. My research in this sector concluded that context interacts with the photojournalist’s situational work, and it revealed, in my case, how this interaction has marked my shift to a more aesthetic/art-based approach.

After analysing the core values of photojournalism and exploring aftermath photography’s aesthetic priorities, I position myself somewhere in the middle between the two genres, yet, without ever acting outside the more general and more realistic, in social terms, field of Documentary Photography, since it is the photojournalists’ work that moves me most and therefore my work is marked by its values. On the other hand, I also strongly believe that photojournalism is an art, being an expressive form that provides the viewer with a context for understanding the world in an authentic way.

In Chapter Two in examining the ethical dimension of how right it is to present images of people suffering, especially in terms of responsibility and in the context of “citizen photojournalism” through the work of Geert Van Kesteren and Thomas Hirschhorn, I concluded that photojournalism’s “bearing witness” concept is more about the privileged close relationship between the photographer and the subject as well as the access to the absolute definitions of “reality” and the psychical location where history is being written. This explains the need for photojournalism to push further its forms and language – which is a way to continue my own work.

In Chapter Three I focused my research on the photographic representation of North Korea by revisiting the most important “realistic” photojournalists,
namely Margaret Bourke-White, Chris Marker and Seok Imsaeng, and I examined them in comparison with the more aesthetic photographers, Philippe Chancel, Charlie Crane and Andreas Gursky. I concluded that there is a need to differentiate these two kinds of photographers in terms of both aesthetics and ideology and their approach to the subject. The first category serves the purely journalistic point of view and thus its representatives have to obey the code of ethics imposed by their profession, acting and thinking in a rather conventional way; on the other hand the second category introduces a rather modern version of photographic evidence, where photographers clearly choose to keep a distance from their subject, by using slow devices, thus emphasizing its aesthetic representation.

By presenting my approach to North Korea I showed that I borrow elements from both categories—on the one hand, the traditional humanist principles and on the other hand the artistic rules of aesthetics— but I deviate from both, locating myself at the third corner of an imaginative triangle, facing both trends, incorporating lessons from both movements, without though staying ambivalent between the two, but rather decisively promoting my own view, which I can describe as “representation via suggestion”. Moreover, another criterion is the reason for which the representatives of both categories choose North Korea as their working terrain. At a personal level this fundamental selection criterion differentiates my work from that of Philippe Chancel and Andreas Gursky. In addition, in my turn towards aesthetics, another contrast between my work and that of these two significant but dissimilar photographers is my belief that documentary photography has to carry mainly a political remark. Furthermore, being also influenced by my doctoral research, I reconsidered the utopian effort of the photographer’s “close encounter” to the event.

In this context, I felt the need to capitalize on my previous work and to reach another audience beyond photojournalism, which I believe, is an important merit in documentary photography. With the photojournalist’s desire to gain
credence as a creative photographer through books and galleries and less through news magazines I chose a working environment free from physical constraints: Malaysia offered me the opportunity to experiment with my new approach in order to explore South East Asian rampant consumerism and to contrast this new work against, but also connect it with, my North Korea work. The result of this new project was a series of comparisons, which lay the path for my passage to photography genres beyond photojournalism. By examining the role of the environment and the contextual restrictions in all approaches and techniques I examined in my thesis I surmised that photojournalism’s core humanist values are always the main drive for my personal work. This interaction between me as the photographer and my context has marked my shift to a more aesthetic/art-based approach in my photojournalistic work, but without though giving up its humanist values. Nonetheless, still, the violence and suffering I witness makes me suffer too, knowing that the more powerful the image I take the more people I shall affect. Images can be uncompromising, brutal or unacceptable in human terms but I believe that you don’t become anaesthetized by photographing many horrors. On the contrary, it seems that eyewitnesses become more sensitized as they seek to capture raw war images of people’s lives. As far as it concerns my own work, photographing exactly this particular subject matter has made me value even further my humanist principles, not only in terms of the interpretation and usage of my images, but also with regard to the limits of compassion, of respect to the person being photographed and of the sense of responsibility: namely the requirement of justice being done and of the political message passing through – no matter whether this is actually feasible or not.

In conclusion, I believe that the option of aesthetization or remoteness may be a photographer’s primary concern; nevertheless, it should be his/her personal conscious choice and not be imposed by any external and/or contextual constraint.
My humanist core values are unnegotiable and beyond any compromise. I feel on my back the sense of responsibility towards history and all those who shall study or refer to my work in the future. Such priorities do not leave any space for agreements or bargains with the propaganda or the orders of any totalitarian regimes; I do not impair my subject matter in the name of aesthetics, as art photographers, by following an indirect path, do to a certain degree. Since my own kind of photography – of the journalistic type – is more widely accepted than the kind of art photography, the need for a strong, unnegotiable and accurate political message becomes even greater.
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Appendix

A) Circumstantial account of my work in Kosovo and Albania

As a freelance professional photojournalist, I have been associated with several domestic and international agencies to produce photojournalism and to cover major stories worldwide. I started my career in 1992 with the Greek agency ICON, before joining the French international agencies SYGMA (1998-2000) and GAMMA (2001-2002) and the American POLARIS IMAGES from its establishment (2003) to date.

Until today, I have documented dozens of long assignments in more than 45 countries of the planet, from Palestine and Israel to Western Sahara and Sierra Leone, and from North Korea and Indonesia to Iran and Colombia. I have covered significant events, namely the recent wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Kosovo, the pyramid crisis in Albania in 1997, the devastating earthquake in Turkey in 1999, the political change in former Yugoslavia and the crisis in South Lebanon in 2000, the conflict in FYROM in 2001, the anti-globalization demonstrations in Genoa in 2001, the conflicts over the disputed territory of Kashmir on the India-Pakistan border in 2002, the Olympic Games of Athens in 2004, the immigration issue on the US-Mexican borders, the funeral of Pope John Paul II, the terrorist attacks in London in July 2005 and the life of Maoist guerrillas in Nepal as well as several assignments in Jordan, Egypt, Japan, Indonesia, Spain, Mauritania and Senegal.

My work has been awarded 20 significant prizes to date, including first prizes in the World Press Photo Competition, POYi, Life Magazine's Alfred Eisenstaedt Award, N.P.P.A. "The Best of Photojournalism" and Médicos del Mundo Luis Valtueña Award. My photographs, texts and interviews have been published in the world's most renowned magazines, such as Time, Newsweek, Life, The New York Times, Stern, Der Spiegel, Nouvel Observateur, Paris Match, L' Express, Le Monde, Libération, The
Independent, Guardian, The Sunday Times Magazine, The Observer, GEO, L'Espresso, Panorama, La Republica, El Pais and have been presented at international exhibitions.

During 1996-97, Albania was convulsed by the dramatic rise and collapse of several huge financial pyramid schemes. The pyramid scheme phenomenon in Albania was extremely important because of its enormous scale compared to the size of the economy and the profound political and social impact following its collapse. Many Albanians—about two thirds of the population—had invested in them. When the schemes collapsed, there was uncontained rioting, the government fell, and the country collapsed into anarchy. 2,000 people approximately were killed during the riots that ensued. In March 1997, I was assigned to Albania as a correspondent for the Greek photo agency ICON. The scope of my assignment was to provide the Greek press with photos of all events happening during the crisis, which I did on a daily basis. I have traveled in almost the entire country, from Saranda, Argyrokastro and Premeti to Avlona and Tirana. The situation was beyond control and almost all citizens had access to military ammunition, which on several occasions put at risk my own safety (see figure 23).

Figure 23 ©Yannis Kontos, Military camp, Argyrokastro, 12 March 1997.
Since early in the morning I was moving in a car without plates taking photos of looted military camps and protest rallies until late in the evening when I was expected to transmit the material of the day. That was my first international experience in a conflict zone and it did enjoy a great success. My pictures appeared in numerous magazines and front pages of the Greek press.

In April 1999, I started working with the French agency SYGMA and I was proposed to cover the Kosovo war. Between 1998 and 1999 the army and police of former Yugoslavia was clashing with the Kosovo Liberation Army. From March 24, 1999 until June 11, 1999, NATO attacked Yugoslavia, and the ethnic Albanian militia was in a continuous cross-firing with the Yugoslav military forces, amidst a massive displacement of a population of approximately 1 million people in Kosovo. The NATO countries presented the war in Kosovo as the first humanitarian war on the basis of short-term military reports and casualty reports that were later criticized as highly inaccurate. The news headlines focused on the Kosovo war for months, which was translated by tremendous coverage and attention from the international community and media. That was the challenge I was looking forward and even though I was not prepared for a military conflict I accepted the SYGMA proposal immediately. At a first stage I took photos of the masses of the Kosovo refugees fleeing in thousands through the Kosovo – FYROM borderline (see figure 4, p.34) and by the end of April I was one of the very few western journalists who had succeeded in penetrating Kosovo, thus reaching the true combat zone of bombardments and sending photographs to my agency almost every day. The circumstances were extremely difficult indeed, taking into account the frequent shortage of water and electricity, which made the film processing and picture transmission almost impossible. On a number of occasions I was obliged to walk and find a spring on the mountains to get water or I had to buy water secretly from the cook of a hotel to prepare on my own the chemicals for film development. Needless to say, I had turned my hotel room into a photographic dark room, with roll films hanging from the ceiling. As if all the above were not enough, the Serbian forces restrictions
and propaganda had made the whole situation even harder. I remained in Kosovo until the cease of bombardments (June 11, 1999) and the invasion of the NATO forces. My photos from the Kosovo war had been published extensively on the international press, thus offering me international acknowledgment as a war correspondent (see figure 24).

![Figure 24](24-30 June 1999)

B) Definition of "paradox" between my earlier and later work

Paradox may be considered a phrase, a picture or a work as a whole, the content of which appears to be either irrational or contradictory, yet involving another facet of reality within its contradiction or irrationality. In my opinion a perfect example of such juxtaposition – in terms of subject and in terms of politics – is my contradictory and oxymoron work from North Korea and Malaysia (Kontos, 2011) together with the generic work of my early period until today, which is based on thematic and visual paradoxes.

My work to date has been interpreted in two ways.
As regards my former work from North Korea, Thanassis Moutsopoulos has stressed the surrealistic point of view and the contradiction between images, which also involved an element of cult:

' [...] the things that catch us unawares with their incongruity: girls with Kalashnikovs; crowds milling in front of giant posters inciting the destruction of American imperialism rather than the acquisition of consumer products; a metropolis with sky-scrapers but without advertisements plunged into darkness at ten every evening; the carefree black-clad policeman (?) in the dark glasses having a whale of a time in the little canary-colored, cat-whiskered bumper car; the Great Leader's portrait in every possible public and private space;'

(2007, pp. 8-9).

He implies that what we see is a paradox, the image of a paradox, which involves clearly the way one may 'read' my pictures.

The critic of Penelope Petsini reflects the other extreme when she observes that what we see is a paradox if we eliminate the element of politics:

'A discussion of Yannis Kontos's documentary images and of possible responses to them, demands thinking not only about the meanings and uses of images, but about the nature of conflict, the limits of sympathy, and the obligations of conscience, namely the very notion of responsibility. This would inevitably bring us face to face with what Derrida would call the impossibility of responsibility or an irresolvable aporia (5). Aporia comes from the Greek ἀπορία (from α-πορος) meaning "the impassable", denoting a logical contradiction, a paradox. Derrida termed possible/impossible aporias the paradoxes that afflict certain notions in which the condition of their possibility is also and at once the condition of their impossibility; the notion of responsibility is one of them.' (2007, p.8).

In my early work, when I focus on the photo visual paradox I am not fully conscious of the particular point of view. When I started taking photos I used to 'chase' visual contradictions because I was convinced that that was the best way to understand the irrational world we live in. Regardless of all the above, my current approach has not changed compared to my early period. Despite the distance it takes from photojournalism, the visual reproduction of contradictions remains an ever lasting value in my work, which I wish to reflect in my pictures. Paradoxes are a fundamental element of my point of view and
of the way I deal with the events I choose to preserve forever with my camera (see figure 25).

![Figure 25 ©Yannis Kontos, Mitrovica, June 1999.](image)

Last but not least, I am deeply preoccupied with the way the paradox is present in our world and around me. To create a paradox, I juxtapose two pictures, one next to the other, in order to take a political stance.

C) Realization of what are the limits of photojournalism in Iraq

I landed in Baghdad for the first time in January 27, 2003 almost two months before the onset of the war, known as the Operation Iraqi Freedom. At the beginning I was a correspondent of the *Newsweek* magazine for almost one month and then of Stern, the German magazine (see figures 26 & 27).
The initial estimation for my mission was 3 weeks, yet I stayed for 3 months. Before the war broke out, I had the opportunity to travel through the country.
from Basra (South) to Tikrit (North) and take photos. During such period I photographed the daily life of Iraqi citizens, the impressive huge symbols of the regime as well as the occasional preparation of a seemingly imminent war (see figure 28).

This period was less dangerous compared to what it followed, yet it was extremely damaging psychologically because of the continuous surveillance and control exercised by the minders of the Saddam Hussein regime whom we were obliged to take with us on a daily basis.

What followed once the bombardments started was quite dangerous but as the surveillance gradually became less stringent, I felt more relaxed. Moreover, the instant change of the political scenery from a collapsing regime generated every day new prospects of taking photos of areas and situations that were impossible to photograph until such time.
The circumstances for journalists became extremely dangerous when the American forces invaded Baghdad (April 9, 2003) and the collapse of the regime was a fact with utter chaos and anarchy reigning throughout the country (see figure 29).

Figure 29 ©Yannis Kontos, US Marines arrest Iraqi looters, Baghdad. 13 April, 2003.

I left Iraq on April 20, 2003 to get back again almost a year later, on June 20, 2004 for an assignment for the American magazine *US News & World Report*. During such period I was embedded with the American army and I used as residence the Saddam Hussein summer palace near the Baghdad International Airport, which was converted into a military base. As an embedded correspondent in a military unit, I had to follow the military program, which involved daily patrols and house searches by night as well as the arrest of Iraqis considered as suspects (see figures 30 & 31).
TROUBLEMAKERS, BEWARE
An up-close look at the US effort to identify Iraq's angry insurgents.

Figure 30 ©Yannis Kontos, Baghdad, one year after. US News & World Report [publication], July, 2004.

Figure 31 ©Yannis Kontos, Night raids, Baghdad. July, 2004.
In the past years *Time* and *The New York Times* have asked me to return to Iraq as a non embedded correspondent but I have refused—as most of my western colleagues did—because of the great risk involved, since the opportunities to circulate and take photos freely are rather minimal.