

Representing war.

The dossier at hand ponders the relationship between war, history and art. Nachtwey in an essay dated 1985, Campbell in an analysis written in 2014, Hanson in an article published in the New York Times in 1998, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti in a piece of poetry entitled "History of the airplane" written in 2004 in the wake of 9/11 explicitly come up with a way to perceive war and read history and raise the following question: do recorders of war accurately and reliably shape people's view of history? They all reflect upon the role of observers of war and point to a clear gap between the representation of history and historical truth. More implicitly, they all probe human nature and denounce the tragedy of existence.

Unlike Campbell who plays down the impact of the "Napalm Girl" photograph, stating that the picture did not interfere in the course of history, Nachtwey contends that a war photographer can contribute to bridging the gap between historical truths and the untruth peddled by the mass media, thus reinstalling humanity into the war process. For his part, Hanson implies that Greek historian Thucydides should enlighten modern readers. Being an eye-witness to the Peloponnesian War, he bequeathed contemporary scholars a realistic narrative and insider knowledge that can help understand today's wars and struggles. Similarly, Ferlinghetti, a distant and ironic observer, aims at denouncing the human hubris that resulted in the "chaos and despair" of 9/11. He invites citizens to mistrust the so-called "peacemakers" who see themselves as makers of history while being merely "makers of wars."

Thus Ferlinghetti points to the discrepancy between representations of war - supposedly a way to "make peace on earth" - and historical truths: aerial projects at all times have proved destructive of human life, 9/11 being the most glaring example.

Nachtwey confirms that it is the artist's role to restore historical truth as he contends that photographers need to stymie misinformation and help people wake up to the world around them.

Hanson argues that Thucydides successfully bridged the gap between biased representations of war and historical truth by adopting a non-scholarly approach to conflicts thus helping people relate to the events he recounts.

Only Campbell stands apart as his contention is no photographers should be lionized for his so-called contribution to history. He lashed out at the media which create icons that shut out reality.

Finally, the dossier assumes a philosophical dimension. All writers are engaged in a pursuit of absolute truths about the human condition which, according to Hanson, have remained unchanged since Thucydides, and about the tragedy of human existence, something photography can capture (Nachtwey's credo), an argument disclaimed by Campbell for whom truth cannot be "media-driven."

By dismantling the lie that aviation pioneers and statesmen have always sought "peace", Ferlinghetti denounces the immutability and universality of human nature: warfare is an eternal process and 9/11 will forever be the iconic representation of "chaos and despair."

Likewise, Nachtwey is under no illusion: there is something immutable about human nature. Neither is Campbell who sets himself up as a researcher of universal truths about human behavior. These truths subvert people's faith in the continuous advancement of humanity towards enlightenment but offer them "relief," Hanson writes, and arouse human consciousness.