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Conveying the Tragedy of War Through Unconventional Photography Methods

Summary: This article analyses the specificity of conveying the tragedy of war through artistic photography. Comparing photos from the Vietnam War and the contemporary Russian-Ukrainian war illustrates how the range of figurative means has expanded. Photography of the Vietnam War had a narrow range of topics and limited methods of conveying content. In contrast, Ukrainian frontline photography is more diverse, with unconventional techniques emerging in military artistic photography. Many romantic photographs depicting landscapes and animals have surfaced, and the role of symbolism in photographic images has increased. This article aims to highlight the differences between past and present frontline photography while emphasising the greater symbolism and hidden meaning present in contemporary photography, as the tragedy of war resonates with the viewer through indirect allusions.

Keywords: tragedy of war, Ukraine, artistic photography, unconventional techniques

<https://doi.org/10.18778/3071-7779.2024.2.08> — received: 20.05.2024 — verified: 17.09.2024 — accepted: 11.11.2024

121-140

funding information: not applicable — **conflicts of interests:** none — **declaration regarding the use of GAI tools:** not used
ethical considerations: the authors assure of no violations of publication ethics and take full responsibility for the content of the publication
the percentage share of the author in the preparation of the work is: [YI 25%] [AP 25%] [AD 25%]



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No longer can we consider what the artist does to be a self-contained activity, mysteriously inspired from above, unrelated and unrelatable to other human activities.

Rudolf Arnheim¹

Traditionally, the techniques of reportage photography or techniques of art photography that are close to them are used to depict the tragedy of war. The development of photography allowed a wider documentation of the events of the war, which is demonstrated by the modern Russian-Ukrainian war. However, if you compare photos from the time of the Russian-Ukrainian war with photos from the time of the war in Vietnam, they are significantly different. In comparison with the events of the war in Vietnam – primarily because most of the photos are of Americans who fought on foreign territory (Fig. 1, 2). On the other hand, in Ukraine, there are a large number of photos made by the military and civilians themselves, who are defending their land from invaders. Photos from the war in Vietnam are mostly black and white, and photos from the Russian-Ukrainian war are mostly colour – black and white only to convey a tragic story as much as possible. It should also be added that traditional photographic methods require developing an image on photographic paper and presenting it to a magazine or gallery wall. Nowadays, with the use of digital media (both cameras and smartphones), photographers can publish their entire series on the Internet and add content such as audio or video. This speed of creation and its dissemination has a significant impact on the perception of the visual side of modern warfare conflict. When comparing American photography from the Vietnam War with contemporary photographs from the war in Ukraine, more significant differences are apparent.

Most of the pictures of American photographers are mainly of soldiers, whether on the march or in battle, even wounded. The second group of photos shows the interrogations and murders of local people. Photographs from the time of the Russian-Ukrainian war also have subjects related to the military and scenes of dead civilians but the images of the military have more humanity and patriotism, as people are fighting for their land. It can be said that in modern conditions, the range of artistic military photography and methods of conveying subjects are more developed. The nomenclature of plots also expanded. These are battle scenes with soldiers (Fig. 3), military portraits (Fig. 4), destroyed buildings (Fig. 5), military equipment, landscapes, civilian life, death scenes, symbolic military attributes, and photos with animals.²

1 Arnheim R. 1969, 5.

2 Belinskyi S. 2023, 15–35.



Fig. 1. American soldier of 'Tunnel Rats' in Vietnam (Source: <https://vsi.reactor.cc/post/4441090>)



Fig. 2. American soldiers in Vietnam
(Source: <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/vietnam-war>)



Fig. 3.
Machine gunner. Bakhmut
(Photo: Belinskyi S. 2023)



Fig. 4.
Neer Bakhmut
(Photo: Belinskyi S. 2023)



Fig. 5.
Kramatorsk, ruins
(Photo: Belinskyi S. 2023)

So, it can be argued that the tragic image of war was romanticized to some extent, which was not the case in the Vietnam War photography. The plane of the frame, the plot became deeper in terms of content and methods of plot transmission, and the transmission of the human factor became an important component. This is primarily due to the fact that these photos were taken by the defenders, not the occupiers.

At the same time, genres of photography, such as landscape and animalism, which are unconventional for depicting war, affect the viewer's deep emotions. It is on this principle that traditional Japanese artworks, which transmit certain emotions through indirect means. Fascination with the culture and philosophy of Ancient Japan by one of the authors of the article, a military officer, led to the appearance of a series of wartime photographs based on the idea of 'transmitting the world without people' – a landscape or an image of animals.

Through the prism of the European worldview, he used the following principles:

- convention and symbolism, when everyone in his way perceives the image and, accordingly, everyone invents his own
- maximum brevity, which opens the field for 'artist-spectator' co-creation
- incompleteness, leaving a part of the image 'out of frame' for the viewer's imagination
- indirect allusions, when one phenomenon refers to a hidden second phenomenon
- transmission of the artist's own emotions through nature and living beings

The years of the Russian-Ukrainian war led to the emergence of the modern genre of military art – artistic photography, poetry, paintings, music and songs. As the experience of history shows, such processes were generally characteristic of times of war, when artistic inspiration, embodied, 'splashed' in works, became a certain outlet for both civilians and military personnel. Homer's *Iliad* and haiku works written by *sakimori* (防人) warriors-guards of Ancient Japan in the 7th–10th centuries are characteristic examples of literary celebration of the tragic events of war. *Sakimori* guarded the lands of Western Japan (the islands of Kyushu, Iki, and Tsushima) from the invasion of the army of the Chinese Tang dynasty. They left their contribution to ancient Japanese literature, in particular, in the anthology of Japanese poetry *Manyōshū* – the so-called 'Sakimori songs' (防人歌, *sakimori-no-uta*), the theme of which was longing for the homeland and soldier's life.

As it turned out, similar techniques have become relevant in the presentation of the tragedy of the Russian-Ukrainian war, as they use similar means of influencing the viewer's psyche. This is conventionality and symbolism, when the image is perceived by everyone in their way and, accordingly, everyone invents his own; maximum laconicism, which opens the field for co-creation 'artist-spectator'; incompleteness, leaving a part of the image 'out of frame' for the viewer's imagination. Techniques of indirect allusions are used when one phenomenon refers to a hidden second phenomenon and the transfer through nature and living creatures of the artist's own emotions.

One of the authors of the article, Serhiy Belinsky, admires the culture and philosophy of Japan, so he subconsciously used the principles inherent in traditional Japanese art in depicting the horrors of war, but through the prism of the European worldview.

The study aimed to analyze how the author conveys the tragedy of war and his perception of war through these genres, which are not the main traditional ones for expressing war themes.

To achieve the goal, the following tasks were defined:

- to separate from the general photographic works those that represent the genres of landscape and animalism;
- determine the list of figurative techniques used in them;
- outline the most common techniques.

Such an unusual approach to photography of traditional genres during the Russian-Ukrainian war made it difficult to select the source base, as it is used for the first time to some extent. In particular, scientific sources were developed in the following directions:

- specialised sources on art photography techniques³
- publications in which the problem of artistic criteria is raised⁴
- sources that highlight the aspect of style formation
- scientometric sources that highlight the tragedy of the Russian-Ukrainian war

The main concepts in the research analysis of photographic works

The basic research methods were the tenets of the iconological method defined by Erwin Panofsky,⁵ whereby the artwork is suspended in a broader cultural context and the method of Rudolf Arnheim's psychology of perception.⁶ In the second case, the importance of understanding how the human eye organises perceived material concerning the psychological conditions of the human brain is crucial. Arnheim pointed out that when we see and feel certain properties of a work of art, we often do not know how to translate them into words. He saw the reason for this not so much in the use of language but in the inability to translate values perceived by sight into appropriate categories. The researcher noted that language cannot perform the task directly, as it is not a direct route to interacting with reality: 'that visual things cannot be conveyed by verbal language.'⁷ In this sense, the descriptive language of an artwork only

3 Peterson B. 2017; Biver S. et al. 2022.

4 Gryglewski P. et al. 2020, 57–88; Gryglewski P. et al. 2021, 168–190; Orlenko M., Ivashko Y. 2019, 171–190; Pawłowska A. 2019, 137–151; Sztabiński G. 2019, 19–35; Sztabińska P. 2010a, 91–108; Sztabińska P. 2010b, 81–90; Sztabińska P. 2014, 45–56.

5 Panofsky E. 1939.

6 Among others: Arnheim R. 1969; Arnheim R. 1979; Arnheim R. 1986.

7 Arnheim R. 1974, 5.

provides names for what we have seen, heard, or thought. Referring to the concepts of Panofsky and Arnheim, it can be considered that visual perception is not based on observation alone, as it is shaped by physiological, cognitive, and cultural patterns, acting as limiting rules. Therefore, it is legitimate to look for inspiration in the art of Japanese woodcuts for Serhiy Belinsky's war photography.

General scientific methods of defining features, art analysis such as system-structural analysis and comparative analysis were also used to formulate the research problems,⁸ each of which performed a specific task, which made it possible to finally group the images according to their common features, which facilitated their comparison; and allowed the integrity of the photographic image to be broken down into distinct hierarchical components and to trace the specificity of photography at the level of compositional features and individual component-images; The method of comparative analysis, therefore, made it possible to compare artistic techniques in photographs of the same genre and of different genres, identifying between them what they have in common and what differs.

Transformation of landscape and animalism genres in war photography

The landscape genre in art photography is quite widespread, but in war photography, it has its specificity, as evidenced by the examples of photographs from the time of the Russian-Ukrainian war.

The photo fixation method provided a basis for analyzing this genre during the Russian-Ukrainian war.

With the help of the method of defining features, the possible criteria were identified, according to which photos can be divided into separate groups and analyzed within these groups. In particular, methods of conveying the atmosphere of war through day and night landscapes were analyzed (Fig. 6–13).

Certain conclusions can be obtained by comparing the compositional techniques of day and night landscape photographs.

Daytime photographs use a pastel colour scheme, often with a large expanse of sky, often emphasizing blooming nature rather than technology, with buildings, small figures of animals, and people as complementary accents. If you analyze photography techniques, the principle of constructing a frame plane with a displacement of the accent element with the dominant mass is widely used, most often to the right, less often to the left or in the centre. In daytime landscapes, there is no sharp 'light-shadow' contrast, and the genre itself acquires signs of the psychological impression of 'tragic lyricism.'

⁸ Żychowska M. et al. 2022, 273–297.





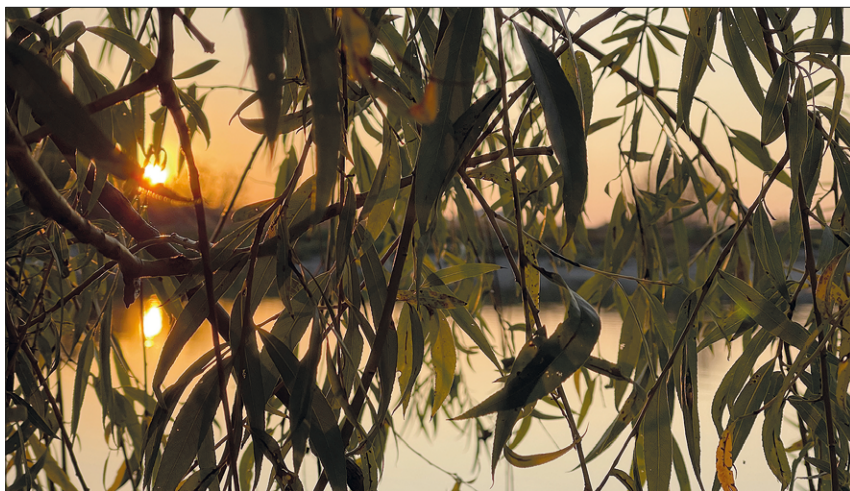


Fig. 6–13. Day views of Eastern Ukraine (Photo: Belinskyi S. 2023)

Instead, the way of conveying the atmosphere of war in night landscapes is fundamentally different. If the dominant impression of daytime photographs is tragic lyricism, then in the case of night photographs, the theme of fire as a symbol of death is dominant. To create the impression of maximum tension, contrasting colours are used with the dominance of bright saturated colours, most often opposite in colour spectrum (warm-cold colours). Emphasis on nature in daytime landscapes is replaced by an emphasis on technology, nature acts as a dark secondary background. In night photographs, the number of elements is limited, there are no buildings or animals, and the main thing is the contrast of 'light and shadow' with the theme of the fire of military equipment firing. If we talk about the compositional techniques of photography,

then, in this case, the principle of constructing the frame plane is used with the displacement of the accent element – military equipment – to the extreme right or left corner with the main line of fire outlined, or from the lower right corner to the upper left, or from the lower left corner in the upper right, which contributes to creating the impression of maximum mental tension, danger.

Among war photography, the technique is the main plot component of the night photography frame. In night photographs with battle scenes, a diagonal line of fire is clearly visible, which gives the frame expression.

A separate group of night photos consists of the last two photos without images of equipment. 'In feigned captivity' and 'Red maples' are night landscapes of front-line Kramatorsk, which embody a hidden meaning and in their hidden essence are closest to Japanese poetry - they symbolize the numerous victims due to the bloody colour of the maples and the psychological tension and fatigue of the defenders who they feel in the branches, which seem to reach for the light of the lantern, the image of the invaders. These two photographs are a reflection of the subconscious, they convey the feeling of war through indirect allusions.

The genre of animalism also became popular in war photography. According to Serhii Belinskyi, communication with animals helps to preserve humanity and relieve psychological stress. In such photos, the emphasis is on animals, sometimes animals are depicted in their natural environment, and animals are presented as the personification of good defenceless creatures that lost their usual life due to war often used the technique of depicting the animal in close-up when the eyes are visible. Most often, the image of the animal occupies most of the frame, but in some cases, the animal is smaller to show it in a military environment, against the background of a car, thereby expressing the opposition of defenselessness and war. In such photographs, images of fire and bright flashes are not used, but everything is aimed at creating a psychological impression of 'tragic lyricism.'

Thus, the work of a modern press officer differs from the work of photojournalists during the Vietnam War.⁹ First and foremost, it is important to note that during the Vietnam War, American soldiers found themselves in a country that was foreign to them both socially and culturally, surrounded by a hostile natural environment and under constant threat of enemy attacks. The tension that accompanied these conditions is evident in the photographs taken by U.S. Army photographers, which are exclusively reportage in nature. On the other hand, when a press officer or photographer films the events of the war on his territory, the psychological impression of perceiving the images of the war will be different. That is why the photos of Ukrainian photographers have not only a reporter and journalistic component but also an artistic aspect. A press officer's tasks are quite diverse: they facilitate communication

9 To see more: Adams A., Buell H. 2008, 11–15.

with the media, accompany journalists on assignments, act as a guide, bodyguard, and translator simultaneously, and organise meetings with fighters as well as photo shoots. In addition, the press officer ensures communication between combat units and prepares materials for the Internet page. Since the press officers are professional photographers, even documentary photos often acquire the characteristics of artistic photography. In addition to official photos and videos, a fund of photos subject to the rules of creative photography is being created for the brigade's pages.

Traditionally, artistic photography uses techniques to convey dynamism to achieve a certain effect, such as diagonals, objects associated with movement (types of transport), and moving creatures. If we compare day and night landscape photos with animalistic photos, it is noticeable that in night photos dynamism is maximally emphasized due to diagonal lines (parts of military equipment, direction of fire, light-colour contrast), on the other hand, in daytime landscape photos dynamism is less noticeable and photos with the image of animals are completely static.

Similarly, these three types of photographs can be analyzed by the effects of creating the impression of spatiality, where the techniques of image planning, empty background, focus, and accentuation of objects with light-shadow and colour ratios are used. In the case of day and night landscape photographs, the technique of planning and the space of the sky is actively used; on the other hand, in photographs of animals, spatiality does not have such importance; the emphasis is placed on the central figure of the animal.

Another aspect worth analyzing is the emotional component of photographs. The greater effect of 'tragic lyricism' of daytime landscape and animalistic photographs is achieved due to the absence of a contrasting combination of colours, a similar or pastel colour scheme, and the absence of colour combinations associated with danger (red-black, orange-black, orange-ultramarine). The scale of different images plays an important role. It is emphasized that the dominant scale of images of military equipment in night photographs symbolizes that modern war is artillery, while the dominant scale of animals in photographs presents them as objects of love and humanity, which people often lack.

Common to all three types of photography is what is associated with traditional Japanese culture,¹⁰ namely the indirect transfer of the artist's emotions through other images, in this case not through people, but through nature, inanimate objects, and animals; the transformation of a specific real object (tank, cannon, landscape, animal) into a certain symbol – of modern war, human tragedy or the opposition of the kindness of defenceless animals to human malice and animal cruelty, people and animals seem to switch places; absence of oversaturation with unnecessary elements, only those components are present that are sufficient to create a certain meaningful message.

10 To see more: Orlenko M. et al. 2021, 1003–1009; Orlenko M. et al. 2020, 499–501.







Fig. 14–21. Night landscapes of Eastern Ukraine (Photo: Belinskyi S. 2023)

The peculiarity is dynamism as a transfer of the effect of the heat of war and static as a personification of the unchanging values of the world (in this case, through blooming landscapes or animals). In some cases, a part of the main image is deliberately placed outside the frame (a tank, a cow's body, part of a car) to create the effect of the viewer's guesswork, 'finishing' the picture.

Sometimes, the photos were supplemented with a text similar to Japanese poetry *haiku*, for example:

- Homeless
- Cow's
- Sad eyes

Sometimes, in photographs of animals, a person becomes secondary, in the background, or generally as a silhouetted reflection in a mirror. A real dog, a ghostly person...

Here, it is worth noting the growing role of inanimate objects, namely formidable military equipment, for creating a certain emotional content and image of war. Thus, in night landscape photographs, the emphasis is shifted from nature (although it is a landscape genre) to military equipment in a natural environment. Thus, it creates a special kind of traditional wartime landscape photography.

If we analyze the landscape photography of peacetime and wartime, in wartime such photographs hardly depict people, even silhouettes, their place is taken by military equipment, dugouts covered with poppies, etc.

An important role is the lines, which reveal the main element of the frame and give the photograph a hidden meaning.

Conclusions

The modern Russian-Ukrainian war in the images of photography differs from the photos of the Vietnam War. The difference lies in the very nature of these two wars, the war in Vietnam, and the Russian-Ukrainian war. Since American photographers covering the Vietnam War found themselves in a foreign and hostile environment, constantly under threat, their images reflect this reality.¹¹ Rather than capturing an appreciation for the landscape or architecture, their photographs focus on propaganda or reportage. Instead, along with reportage photography during the Russian-Ukrainian war, the genre of military artistic photography developed, which contains features of reportage photography but is built on the laws and techniques of artistic photography.



Fig. 22. 'Red and White Plum Blossoms' by O. Kōrin (18th century, MOA Museum in Atami, Japan)

11 Adams A., Buell H. 2008, 41.



Fig. 23. Blooming landscapes around Bakhmut. (Photo: Belinskyi S. 2023)



Fig. 24. Red Momiji maple on Mount Kōya, against the background of Grand Central Pagoda – Kongobu-ji Kompon Daito (Photo: J.M. Jullot; source: <https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Момідзірапі#/media/Файл:%20RedTree@Daito2012.jpg>)



Fig. 25. Red maples of Kramatorsk
(Photo: Belinskyi S. 2023)

Photographs of the Vietnam War are more limited in plot and imagery, while the palette of techniques of modern war photography is much wider. This is because a large number of artists are fighting now and bringing their perception of the tragedy of war to their works. Sometimes, the basis of such military photo creativity can be quite unusual, the source for them can even be Eastern cultures, such as poems of *sakimori* warriors, *haiku* poetry, engravings, and screens. Of course, these photos do not repeat Japanese models, but they creatively transform these principles according to the European mentality, which is explained by the photographer's long-term fascination with the art of the East.¹²

Direct analogies can be felt between Ogata Kōrin's screen 'Red and White Plum Tree' (Fig. 22) and the photograph that arose under its influence and based on which the author also wrote a haiku (Fig. 23). Similarly, the photos of red maples in Kramatorsk in Donbas are a direct allusion to the traditional Japanese holiday *momijigari* (紅葉狩) or *momiji* (紅葉) – a holiday of admiring the red leaves of the Japanese maple (Fig. 24, 25).

Thus, here we can talk about the figurative transformation of Japanese iconic images through the war photographer's perception of the image of war. The photographer was inspired by a traditional Japanese holiday, but in his interpretation, the red maples in front of the military vehicle acquire a fundamentally different, tragic symbolism. In Japan, this red colour symbolizes the autumn festival, but in the military context, it primarily symbolizes sacrifice, and the many fallen bright red leaves seem to turn into symbols of the souls of fallen heroes whose lives were cut short by war. The impression of constant tension and danger is also created by the presence of a military vehicle.

¹² To see more: Ivashko Y. et al. 2020, 78–79.

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