

BOSBEFOK: Constructed Images and the Memory of the South African 'Border War'

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Fine Art at the University of the Witwatersrand,
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by

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Abstract

This thesis is part of a creative arts PhD which explores the possibilities of constructed images and the memory of the South African Border War. It was presented together with an exhibition of constructed photographic images entitled *BOS*. In the thesis I argue that the memory of the war, an event now almost three decades past, continues to be problematic. I also argue that photographs are themselves complex and constructed objects that do not provide a simple truth about either history or memory. Photographs can supplement or support memories but they are always to be viewed with suspicion. In Chapter One I explore the limitations imposed on the speech of conscripts, both during the conflict and in the years following the conclusion of hostilities. In Chapter Two I examine the recent appearance of several ‘anti-heroic’ memoirs of the conflict written by conscripts. The use of the medical diagnosis of post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD) in these writings is critically examined. Chapter Three focuses on a development in the ideas of the two most influential figures in the field of Anglophone photographic theory, Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes. I argue that their initial hostility to the photographic image on ethical/political grounds has been replaced by a more nuanced engagement with the power of the image. I then examine the views of two contemporary writers on photography, both deeply involved with the analysis of traumatic images: Ariella Azoulay and Susie Linfield. In Chapter Four, I engage with the artistic practice of the American photographer, David Levinthal, an important reference point for this project because of his photographic work with miniatures and toys and his place within what I describe as ‘critical postmodernism’. In Chapter Five, I examine the themes of silence and censorship as these pertain to the photography of the Border War using Susan Sontag’s notion of the “ecology of images”. I analyze the types of images which have been produced from the war, looking at the “limited photojournalism” of John Liebenberg and the role of iconic images in the propaganda war. Finally, in Chapter Six, I present an account of the process of creating the work for the *BOS* exhibition in which I employed a combination of strategies involving appropriation, miniaturization, and re-staging.

Declaration

I declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work. It is submitted towards the degree of PhD in the field of Fine Arts by creative project and dissertation in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.

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Christo Doherty
4th day of February 2014

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In many ways this study has developed as a dialogue with the work by Rhodes University historian, Prof Gary Baines. Prof Baines first identified several of the important issues that are shaping the emerging and often bitterly contested public memory of the Border War. He also invited me to bring the *BOS* exhibition to Grahamstown and found the funding to make this possible. Corlia Hansen, the curator at the Stellenbosch University Gallery, also responded positively to the *BOS* exhibition and made it possible to take the works to Western Cape where the atmosphere of the old church turned gallery on Dorp Street in Stellenbosch provided perhaps the most resonant environment for the display of the pictures. The French gallerist, Eric Galea, recognised the value of the exhibition and was instrumental in arranging for *BOS* to be exhibited at the Les Recontres Photography Festival in Arles in France in 2013. Discussion with him, about the meaning of the war from a French perspective, has been particularly valuable. This project has also been a dialogue with the work of John Liebenberg.

Engaging with John, as both a photographer and a friend, was a central aspect of this project. John was one of the only professionals who tried to photograph the war and his anguished awareness of the limitations of his role coupled with the power of the photographs that he managed to produce has been a powerful catalyst in my conceptualization of this project.

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INTRODUCTION

As a creative arts PhD which explores the possibilities of constructed images and the memory of the South African Border War, this project has two components: an exhibition of constructed photographic images entitled *BOS* and this thesis, entitled *Bosbefok*. Both titles reference the featureless bush in northern Namibia and southern Angola where the fighting took place as well as the mental condition that afflicted many of the soldiers involved in the war. The Afrikaans phrase *Bosbefok* quite literally means driven mad by the bush. Shortened to *bossies* or just *bos*, the term was used to describe soldiers who had become unhinged from reality as a result of the pressures of the war.

In the thesis I argue that the memory of the war, an event now almost three decades past, continues to be problematic. So dense are the lies and contradictions about the war that the very attempt to track its true history is enough to drive an investigator mad – *bosbefok*. Recently many theorists have argued the relationship between memory and history is inherently unstable. Even in the cases where relative agreement has been reached over the history, memory at both the individual and cultural levels often challenges and problematizes such accepted historical accounts. The veterans of most modern wars seem to struggle with their memories and the need to reconcile their experiences with life after the war (see Sites); and in addition military service during that time in South Africa has an additional taint from its association with the defence of apartheid. Meanwhile the belief, vigorously propagated by the South African government at the time, that the Namibian border with Angola was the border where the forces of Communism had to be held at bay, has evaporated with the collapse of Soviet power and the peaceful transitions to multi-party liberal democracy in both Namibia and South Africa.

It was also a war that for South Africans was kept largely invisible during the years of the conflict. The war was never formally declared and many aspects were deliberately kept secret from the South African public and even from the

combatants themselves. The South African military treated all information about the war on a 'need to know' basis. The extent to which a devastating war was waged in southern Angola was never officially acknowledged and photographs, which could have revealed the extent of the war and its effect on the civilian populations and the South African forces, were rigorously suppressed.

One of the interpretations of the obsessive secrecy on the part of the South African military was that it was necessary because the army relied on conscripts for most of its manpower. The military could not afford to panic a white population that supplied two thirds of the men serving in its forces. Conversely it could be argued that in these circumstances the public had a right to know what was being done with their sons. Whatever the value of these positions, the result is that the conscripts – the great majority of whom went into the army directly after school – were left with the psychological legacy of their military service in a secret or invisible war.

This thesis also argues that photographs are themselves complex and constructed objects that do not provide a simple truth about either history or memory. Photographs can supplement or support memories but they are always to be viewed with ambivalence, even suspicion. At the heart of the BOS exhibition practice is recognition that the work of historical recuperation, when based on photographs, is always ambivalent and complex. Photographs do not simply reveal the truth of their subjects but signify in relation to other images, perhaps especially those from the battlefields of the modern world.

Most accounts date the beginning of the war to 1966, but it was largely a policing action until the collapse of the Portuguese colonial empire in 1974. The Portuguese fall unleashed the events that led to the first unsuccessful incursion into Angola by South African forces in 1975. This was also the year that the United States of America withdrew from Vietnam. As a result the invisible conflict on the Namibian border was overshadowed by the extensive visual representation of the American war in South East Asia. One critic has suggested that the totality of photographs taken in the Vietnam conflict comprise a vast

history painting (Jeffrey 103). Certainly the war in Vietnam was the most photographed post-colonial conflict in the 20th century and the sheer visual dominance – through still photographs and feature films – of that war plays a complex role in the ways in which the Border War has been visualized by South Africans.

This thesis spans a number of different academic fields: medical anthropology, military and political history, art history and photographic theory. Cross-border excursions into these fields serve to elucidate, contextualize and theorize the creative project. In this case the theory followed the intuitive leaps of creative research, but also had to engage with a project that has at its heart a fascination with the way that “photography insistently gives us the pain and boredom of seeing” (Elkins *What Photography Is* n.pag.).

In Chapter One, The War and Cultural Memory, I explore the limitations imposed on the speech of conscripts, both during the conflict and in the years following the conclusion of hostilities. I provide an overview of the war, a struggle waged militarily, diplomatically and psychologically by both sides. I conclude that a generally accepted history is unlikely and furthermore, through a discussion of the exclusion of the names of SADF dead from the sacred heart of South Africa’s premier monument, the S’khumbuto Wall in Freedom Park, that the ‘cultural memory’ of the war is not going to be resolved in public discourse. This exclusion, alongside the insignificant number of Border War testimonies before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, means that the troubled memory of the war will be debated and negotiated in other forums, and it is to this process that the current thesis seeks to contribute and to, perhaps, complicate.

In Chapter Two, Trauma and the Anti-Heroic Memoirs of the War, I examine the recent appearance of several ‘anti-heroic’ memoirs of the conflict written by conscripts. The use of the medical diagnosis of post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD) in these writings is critically examined. What the memoirs reveal is how difficult it is to articulate memories of contemporary war without drawing on a medical explanation. The South African memoirs also demonstrate the

ambiguous role that the diagnosis of PTSD plays in, on the one hand, enabling the authors to speak about their experiences, while, on the other, providing an opportunity for them to distance themselves from the ethical implications of their own involvement in the war. I discuss how the balance within the identity of victim-perpetrator is perhaps too easily collapsed into simple victimhood. I also compare the particular mental state associated with the term *bosbefok/bossies* with the PTSD diagnosis.

Chapter Three, Trauma and Photography, focuses on a development in the ideas of the two most influential figures in the field of Anglophone photographic theory, Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes. Both writers have had an influence that extends far beyond the narrowly defined field of academic photographic theory,¹ and both have profoundly affected general attitudes towards photography and the turn towards 'critical postmodernism' in art photography. Noting the absence of photographs in their most significant works about photography, I argue that their initial hostility to the photographic image on ethical/political grounds has been replaced by a more nuanced engagement with the power of the image. In both cases, I argue that this move has been motivated by their personal experience of trauma and photographic representation. I then examine the views of two contemporary writers on photography, both deeply involved with the analysis of traumatic images: the Israeli scholar Ariella Azoulay and the American media critic Susie Linfield. These writers present complex understandings of how photographs create meaning and engage their viewers, and suggest ways in which constructed photography can be used as a site for transactions between individual and cultural memory. Both these writers, although proposing important new ways of responding to photographs, are primarily interested in the political utility of photographs yet their insights are also productive for an artistic project which explores the politics of making visible.

¹ For a recent attempt to articulate the current debates in photography theory see *Photography Theory (The Art Seminar)* edited by James Elkins. New York: Routledge, 2007.

In Chapter Four, *Miniaturization and Cultural Memory: A Case Study*, I engage with the artistic practice of the American photographer, David Levinthal. I have devoted a chapter to Levinthal because of his photographic work with miniatures and toys and also because his work has engaged in important ways with popular culture and with postmodernism in contemporary art. Levinthal is not simply drawing on the motifs of pop culture but is deeply invested in interrogating products of cultural industries like toys and miniature figurines, asking questions about how these objects interact with cultural memories of war or atrocity. Levinthal's work is also important for my own artistic practice in *BOS* because he presents constructed images that complicate the politics of making historical connections visible through photographs.

In Chapter Five, *Demarcating the Visual Archive of the War*, I examine the themes of silence and censorship as these pertain to the photography of the Border War. While I acknowledge the difficulty of both constructing an archive of images while attempting to critique that same archive, I argue that the invisibility of the war was due to restrictions on a particular practice of image making – professional photo-journalism. Using Susan Sontag's notion of the "ecology of images" (*On Photography* 110) I analyze the types of images which have been produced from the war, looking at the "limited photojournalism" of John Liebenberg and the role of iconic images in the propaganda war. I also examine the presentation of the war within the SADF's own propaganda and the international presentation of the war by SWAPO and its supporters. Finally I assess the recent emergence of amateur photographs taken by SADF soldiers themselves, focusing on both the relatively innocuous 'troopie snapshots' and the darker 'trophy' or 'atrocity photographs.'

Finally, in Chapter Six, *The Artistic Process*, I present an account of the process of creating the work for the *BOS* exhibition in which I employed a combination of strategies involving appropriation, miniaturization, and re-staging. I situate the *BOS* project in relation to my previous work with miniatures – the *Small Worlds* exhibition of 2008, which documented the naïve realism of the South African

landscapes created by railway modellers. I discuss the impact of the Israeli animated documentary, *Waltz with Bashir* (Folman 2008), whose use of non-realist modes to interrogate the memory and amnesia of the Israeli War in Lebanon in 1982 was a liberating influence on my own practice. I also examine Jill Bennett's notion of *empathic vision*, a concept that was equally liberating for my practice at the level of contemporary art theory.

Although an analysis of the reception of the *BOS* exhibition lies outside the boundaries of this project, it was striking how many reviewers responded to the work with an anecdote about their own experience of the awkward silence and invisibility that surrounds the memory of the war. Brenden Gray's recollection at the beginning of his *Artthrob* review is an illustrative example:

One Sunday afternoon, when I was ten years old, I found my father's army photographs in a box in his wardrobe. I remember one image in particular: a Polaroid showing him bare-chested and grinning, sitting in the sand looking directly at the photographer, wearing only his khaki hat and shorts. His rifle was lying in his crotch, and a beer rested on the sand nearby. I asked him who took the picture, and the circumstances under which it was taken. To my puzzlement he spent some time just staring at the tiny photograph in silence. He said something about Rodney, his best friend, 'the bush', 'bossies', sunburn and boredom and left it at that. [...] Until this day, my dad has said nothing about his year in the army and his stint on the border other than when, at a reunion braai of old army friends, he got drunk, hopped onto my bicycle and sped off into the wobbly darkness of the veld, ranting and swearing about God knows what. I realized then that what took place on the border was, for him, an unspeakable affair. (n.pag.)

CHAPTER ONE

THE WAR AND CULTURAL MEMORY

1. Introduction

As an ex-South African Defence Force (SADF) conscript and a veteran of the 'Border' or 'Bush' War in Namibia/Angola, the questions which I have explored in this project have been on my mind for a long time. When I began in 2009 to conceptualize this as a project with visual outcomes, there seemed to be a numbing silence about many aspects of the war. Not only was there a silence, but the policy of censorship during the war seemed to have rendered this conflict nearly invisible.

An anecdote by the Afrikaans actor, Marcel van Heerden, captures the effectiveness of this censorship at the time. Van Heerden had done a year of national service in the Navy in the Western Cape as a non-combatant, before studying drama and then joining one of the state theatre companies during the 1980s. His company was sent on a patriotic theatrical tour of Namibia/South West Africa, which took them into the operational area, and to the town of Oshakati, then the central base of the South African forces. When he arrived at the town, he was shocked and horrified by the extent of the fortifications. Nothing in his experience in South Africa had prepared him for this.² The stark difference between the limited information on the war available in South Africa, and the visual reality in the operational area as experienced by van Heerden, was the result of deliberate government strategy.

The few photographs that appeared in the South African media during the war were a pitifully inadequate representation of the war as the soldiers who

² Marcel van Heerden was speaking at the launch of the Koos CD, Warren Siebrits Gallery, Johannesburg, 18 March 2009. Koos was the legendary noise group that van Heerden formed in 1981 together with the artist Neil Goedhals after his encounter with the Border War.

participated in the conflict experienced it. This was followed by further silence and invisibility in the years after the April 1994 democratic elections in South Africa. A posting made by an anonymous SADF veteran to a web forum in 2005 captures the post-war situation cogently:

Our old government was very serious in keeping our little war very private indeed and away from the world's eyes [. . .]. It's all just memories now. It is also very hard to talk about day-to-day war experiences as people who were not there have no clue what you are on about [. . .].
(colonel n.pag.)

The extract alludes to the process in which private memories become public or 'cultural' memories and are incorporated into a larger shared narrative. The effect of the war's invisibility has meant that the experiences of veterans have not been integrated into any kind of national narrative in South Africa, not even of an 'unjust' war. The consequence is that those experiences have been rendered invisible or absent. The absence is most vividly represented in the public realm by the exclusion of any names of the SADF war dead from the Freedom Park memorial outside Pretoria. One of the major post-apartheid public memorials in South Africa, the Freedom Park complex, according to the official website, "symbolizes the universal connection among South Africans of all backgrounds" with its "core function [. . . to] narrate the story of South Africa's pre-colonial, colonial, apartheid, and post-apartheid history and heritage" (*freedompark.co.za* n.p.). The exclusion of the names of the SADF war dead was therefore a resounding rejection of their place, along with that of the memories of survivors, in any project of national reconciliation.

My project, which uses constructed photographs, re-photography, and re-enactment to explore the relationship between photographs and the memory of the war is in some ways a response to this silence/invisibility. It is also a more general meditation on the role that photography plays in the representation and memory of traumatic events.

The BOS project is not the first artistic endeavour to engage with memory of the Border War. In 1997, eight years after the cessation of hostilities in Namibia, the

Angolan artist Fernando Alvim invited the Cuban artist Carlos Garaicoa and the South African artist Gavin Young to join him in devising a series of symbolic interventions at the Cuito Cuanavale battle site in Angola. The three artists and a film crew, operating with the logistical support of the Angolan army, spent 12 days engaged in “a theatre of conceptual and performative exorcism” (Bester 65) in the Cuito Cuanavale area. The project was conceived as a “dialogue between artists from Angola, Cuba, and South Africa,” with the concept of exorcism fundamental to Alvim’s approach to the project (Kellner 227). The results of their project, entitled *Memorias Intimas Marcas* (Memory Intimacy Traces) were shown in Luanda and at the Cape Town Castle later that year. A further level was added to the project when another six artists were invited to contribute works for exhibition in Johannesburg, and nine in Pretoria. However, as Wendy Morris observes in her analysis of the project, “with a few exceptions, the artists who exhibited for the *Memorias Intimas Marcas* project did not do ‘active service’ in Angola” (160). Alvim was explicitly against any investigation of the experience of combatants, stating: “I didn’t want to make exorcism with ex-combatants. I wanted a dialogue between victims. I’m interested in the civilians, in people who weren’t directly involved in the war” (qtd. in Bester 66). In addition the focus of the project was on amnesia rather than memory, and the project is best understood “in its multiple enactments of loss and intranslatability[sic], and its self-reflexivity, [as] the antithesis of a war memorial or museum” (Morris 172). The focus on amnesia in this context appears deliberate and very telling. The work seemed to protest the amnesia which covered the conflict from all sides – Angolan, Cuban, and South African – yet, as Wendy Morris asserts, it was unable to do more than enact that amnesia.

By contrast BOS is an artistic project which attempts to explore the history and memory of the war through an interrogation of the meaning of photographed images of the war. The project is also informed by a key notion in recent debates over the relationship between personal memories and history – the concept of trauma – and explores the complex ethical and psychological implications of this concept as applied to the memory of the war. The title of the exhibition is BOS, an Afrikaans word meaning ‘bush’ or ‘forest’ that was generally used during the

conflict to refer to the physical context of the war: the endless, featureless 'bush' of northern Namibia and southern Angola. But the exhibition title also references the use of the word *bos* to describe the psychological effect of the violence on soldiers caught up in the conflict. *Bos* or *bossies* were the commonly used short versions of the term *bosbefok*, which quite literally means 'driven crazy by the bush.'³

Unlike the *Memorias Intimas Marcas* project, BOS is also a project which seeks to engage with the media representations of the war, rather than attempting to directly represent traumatic memory. It is an art work which seeks "to find a communicable language of sensation and affect with which to register something of the experience of traumatic memory" (Bennett 2). The exhibition is intended to address a broader audience, particularly the veterans themselves, their families, and a younger generation who have begun asking their own questions about the war and the meaning of the involvement of an entire generation of white South African males in the conflict. By presenting an arrangement of constructed images, re-photography and re-enactments the exhibition also attempts to engage with the discourse which has developed around the memory of the war and the significance and consequences of the conscripts' role in the conflict. In this sense the exhibition is intended to be transactive and to provoke public discourse.

Over the years that the *BOS* project has been in development and in exhibition (from 2009-2013), the silence around the memory of the war has been broken by an increasing number of texts ranging from reviews to memoirs. Different kinds of photographs from the war have also begun to appear in public, notably a collection of snapshots taken by soldiers themselves.⁴ This report will critically assess the trends that are apparent in this emerging discourse and suggest ways

³ The term '*bosbefok*,' *adj. Army Slang* meaning 'fucked,' or 'deranged' is first recorded in South African English in 1979 where it occurs in a *Staffrider* piece by Peter Wilhelm. Penny Silva et al., eds. *A Dictionary of South African English on Historical Principles* (1996), 99.

⁴ Cameron Blake, *Troepie Snapshots: Pictorial Recollections of the South African Border War* (2011).

in which these trends provide a context, or framework of understanding, for the exhibition.

To some extent, a silence in the immediate aftermath of a traumatic war is not uncommon. It is the duration of the silence around the Border War in South Africa that is significant. Samuel Hynes, in his comprehensive history of how English culture responded to the carnage of the First World War, observes that “for a period of nearly a decade, there was a curious imaginative silence about the greatest occurrence of recent history” (423). Even the Vietnam War, during the years of the actual conflict the most bitterly disputed war in American history, took ten years before it entered the post-war public discourse in the United States (Tal 268).⁵ However, the amnesia which clouds the public recollection of the ‘Border War’ has lasted not just ten years, but more than twenty years, a silence that seems to stem from possibly deeper and more conflicted sources.⁶

2. The Names of the War

South Africa’s ‘Border War’ was an undeclared war, an often covert struggle which overlapped with and mutated in response to larger continental and global struggles, notably the civil war in Angola and the ‘Cold War’ between the Soviet Union and the USA. It was also a war that was deemed an “apartheid” war and those fighting on the South African side were commonly referred to as “racists”

⁵ Tal points out that she has not come across any trauma literature, including that pertaining to her focus areas of Vietnam veterans’ experience or the accounts of rape and incest survivors, “that was *not* published at least ten years after the event” (268). In the same footnote, she observes that most of the Holocaust literature took at least twenty years to appear after World War II.

⁶ A better comparison may be with the 1954-62 Algerian-French war of independence. As Robert Fisk writes, “for decades, the French refused to discuss this most dishonourable of wars while the subsequent FLN [the Algerian Resistance Front] dictatorship only published infantile accounts of the heroism of their ‘martyr’ cadres.” Fisk also documents the recent “remarkable phenomenon” of memoirs by surviving Algerian “masquisards from the conflict” of 50 years ago which have only now been published “containing frightening accounts of the savage war in which their officers tortured and massacred and assassinated their own comrades” (37).

and “boers.” Although the fighting took place on Namibia’s remote northern border and in southern Angola it was presented by the government as vital to the balance of power inside South Africa. The name most commonly given by South Africans to the conflict, the Border War or *Grensoorlog*, identified that region as directly significant to South Africa. In part this was due to a residual perception that Namibia/South West Africa was a fifth province of South Africa,⁷ but more fundamentally it was because of the belief, vigorously fostered by the South African government, that the Namibian border was where the combined forces of Marxism and African Nationalism had to be prevented from moving further south. By contrast the same war is known from the Namibian perspective as the ‘Liberation War’ or *Mekondjo* and is celebrated as a successful struggle against the last colonial power to control the territory. The centrality of the war to Namibian national consciousness is recognized by the memorialization of the 1978 Cassinga raid as Cassinga Day on the 4th of May and the 1966 battle at Ongulumbashe as Heroes’ Day on the 26th of August every year (Government of Namibia website). In South Africa, however, following the end of hostilities in 1989 and the tumultuous events that led to the miracle of the new democratic dispensation in 1994, the war in Namibia rapidly disappeared from the national debate. Although the war was to briefly and tangentially appear in the proceedings of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee it was never to receive any sustained attention within South Africa. The memory of the war persists in the often bitter and unresolved memories of the veterans who were conscripted to fight during the long years of the conflict and their struggle either to forget or to find a place for their experiences in the fabric of the new South African national discourse.

3. A Chronology of the War

At the root of the conflict that stuttered and raged between 1966 and 1989 was the status of South West Africa/Namibia within international law. The South

⁷ This point of view is presented by the SA government spokesman, Eschel Rhoodie, in his 1967 tract, *South West: The Last Frontier in Africa*: “South West Africa [. . .] is as much part of South Africa as Alaska is a part of the United States” (32).

Africans took over the administration of the territory after they had expelled the Germans in 1915 from what had been the colony of German South-West Africa. Under an open-ended mandate granted by the League of Nations in 1920 the South Africans were tasked with administering the territory until the inhabitants were “sufficiently developed to govern themselves” (Levinson 54). The South Africans kept the name South West Africa/*Suidwes-Afrika* but effectively adopted the territory as a province, setting up limited self-administration in 1926 through an Assembly elected by white voters, and admitting representatives from the territory to the South African parliament in 1949 (Levinson 54-55). Internal political opposition to South African control began after the Second World War with the formation of a militant workers’ organization, the Ovamboland People’s Organization (OPO), amongst Ovambo migrant labourers working in the docks of Cape Town. The Ovambo, the largest ethnic grouping in South West Africa/Namibia, were to become the heart of the resistance to South African rule. It is estimated that 95% of those who died fighting were Ovambo (Steenkamp, *South Africa’s Border War* 18). While the beginnings of an internal opposition was taking shape in Cape Town and soon afterwards in South West Africa/Namibia⁸ itself, the issue of South African control became internationalized through legal and diplomatic struggles in the World Court and other forums. Meanwhile, in 1959, Sam Nujoma took over the presidency of the Ovambo People’s Organization in Windhoek after the founder, Herman Jiovo ja Toivo had been exiled to northern Ovambo by the South African authorities. Under Nujoma the OPO repositioned itself as a broadly based national movement addressing all ethnic groups in Namibia. Direct involvement in a mass civil disobedience campaign in Windhoek followed, and when a brutal police crackdown on a march in Windhoek in December 1959 killed 11 protesters and wounded 54, the organization renamed itself the South West African People’s Organization (SWAPO). In 1961, after its National Conference in Windhoek, SWAPO began to prepare for armed struggle (Leys and Saul 68-69).

⁸ South Africans referred to the territory as South West Africa/ *Suidwes-Afrika* until its formal independence on 21 March 1990, when it became Namibia. For the purposes of this study, the name Namibia will be used, unless the South African term is required by the context.

During these years a grouping of newly independent nations in Asia and Africa were putting direct pressure on South Africa by contesting the legality of their control of the territory. Ethiopia and Liberia, as the only two African states who were members of the League of Nations, took a case to the World Court in 1960 charging South Africa with having abused its obligations under the original mandate. The case was “the most protracted and far reaching dispute ever to come before the World Court” (Rhodie 196) and took over four years to reach a conclusion in July 1966. The World Court’s decision, reached on a technicality, was that Ethiopia and Liberia had no legal right to pursue the issue. This was however simply the beginning of a protracted diplomatic and legal struggle with a series of resolutions pushed through the United Nations by a grouping of ‘non-aligned’ nations which were in turn consistently contested or rejected by the South African government. While SWAPO continued to pursue political change inside Namibia,⁹ the exiled leadership established a headquarters in Lusaka and set up a military wing, named the People’s Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN). Following training in Tanzania, the first groups of insurgents infiltrated into South West Africa/Namibia through the Caprivi Strip from Zambia in 1966.

The first engagements, following the classic model of guerrilla infiltration, began with small groups of poorly armed insurgents attempting armed propaganda, sabotage, and the assassination of figures identified with South African rule. These incursions were put down by the South African police. The peak of this phase was the unsuccessful attempt by PLAN to establish a semi-permanent base within South West Africa/Namibia in a region of the far north known as Ongulumbashe. The PLAN base at Ongulumbashe was detected and easily destroyed, and the occupants all killed or captured by a South African police team deployed in helicopters. Despite the South African success at Ongulumbashe, a low-intensity guerrilla war continued in the Caprivi and neighbouring Kavango, with small groups of PLAN insurgents filtering over the border from their bases in Zambia to lay mines and sabotage installations associated with South African rule. At the international level, 1970 was a

⁹ SWAPO, unlike the liberation movements in South Africa, was never banned as a political party in South West Africa/Namibia.

significant year in the diplomatic struggle against South African rule because in that year the United Nations Security Council declared the South African occupation illegal in Resolution 276, a view subsequently confirmed in 1971 by a World Court ruling.¹⁰

Heartened by these diplomatic developments and with its forces boosted by growing numbers of disenchanted youth leaving the country, PLAN began to increase their infiltrations into Namibia. As a result they were able to disable the ethnic Ovambo elections held by the South Africans in 1973. By this time “it was becoming patently obvious to the government that the SAP [South African Police] did not have the manpower or other resources simultaneously to keep the peace in South Africa itself, [and] secure the South West African borders” (Steenkamp, *South Africa's Border War* 23). The Defence Force was given responsibility for defending the borders from 1 April 1974 and began deploying into the Caprivi Strip. The operation also marked the beginning of South African Defence Force involvement in Namibia and the institution of a ‘hearts and minds’ campaign of education and infrastructure development in the northern areas in an effort to win the support of the population.

The next dramatic phase of the war was caused by the collapse of Portuguese colonial rule in Angola. The rapid withdrawal of all Portuguese forces after the collapse of the Caetano dictatorship in Portugal in 1974 created a power vacuum leading to a civil war between the three anti-colonial movements which had been fighting against the Portuguese. It was also the moment in which the conflict in Angola was drawn into the Cold War, with the Soviet Union and Cuba providing support for the Marxist aligned *Movimento Popular de Libertacao de Angola* (MPLA), while the United States provided covert support for the *Frente Nacional de Libertacao de Angola* (FNLA) and the *Uniao Nacional para a Independencia Total de Angola* (UNITA). The war escalated with the arrival of Cuban forces in

¹⁰ This is covered by John S. Saul and Colin Leys in their essay, “SWAPO: The Politics of Exile” in Leys and Saul, *Namibia's Liberation Struggle: The Two-Edged Sword*, 40-65.

support of the MPLA in Luanda,¹¹ while a South African force, apparently encouraged by elements within the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), intervened from the south in support of the FNLA and UNITA. The South African intervention, known as Operation Savannah, involving over 2000 soldiers, armoured cars and artillery was unsuccessful in preventing the Cuban-backed forces of the MPLA from seizing control of Luanda. The South African forces withdrew back across the SWA border after 8 months, together with the remnants of the FNLA. The FNLA had been broken as a military force after their unsuccessful attempt to attack Luanda; but UNITA established itself in the extreme south east of Angola. This region, known to the Portuguese as “the end of the earth” because of its remoteness and hostile bush, allowed UNITA to launch a guerrilla war against the MPLA, which, after seizing control of Luanda, declared itself the government of Angola. Meanwhile, with the support of the new MPLA government, SWAPO was able to relocate its military operations from Zambia to Cunene province in southern Angola, from where it was better situated to launch PLAN insurgents directly into Namibia from bases just north of the border. In the words of the SWAPO leader, Sam Nujoma: “What was immediately important to us, and indeed very historic, in the fall of the Portuguese and the independence of Angola, was that early in 1976 we were at last able to take full advantage of the long border with Namibia” (Nujoma 237).

As a result, by the late 1970s the guerrilla war in northern Namibia had escalated considerably, with the SADF facing significantly larger groups of better-armed and aggressive PLAN insurgents. At the same time, on the international diplomatic stage, the continuing South African control of Namibia had been declared illegal by the United Nations and resolution 435 calling for a rapid South African withdrawal and elections had been drafted. The South African response was to organise an internal election, a process rejected by SWAPO who, in a statement by Nujoma – which was exploited by the South Africans for

¹¹ The Cuban intervention, known in Cuba as ‘Operation Carlota’ is covered in Edward George, *The Cuban Intervention in Angola, 1965-1991*: 68-164.

propaganda purposes – declared that they were not interested in majority rule but the seizure of power.¹²

The aggressive South African response to these developments in 1978 introduced a new intensified phase of the war. Beginning in May 1978, with Operation Reindeer, the SADF launched a series of pre-emptive strikes against PLAN bases inside Angola. Paratroopers were used to attack what the South Africans claimed was the main PLAN command and logistics base at Cassinga, over 250 kilometers within Angola. At the same time, motorized infantry were used to destroy a number of smaller operational bases closer to the Namibian border. Although the SADF claimed that the operation was a devastating blow to the PLAN infrastructure, the guerrilla army was able to regroup, and in the years that followed Reindeer the war settled into a pattern based on the seasons of rain and drought. PLAN guerrilla incursions into Namibia took place during the rainy season when the thicker bush and heavy downpours offered protection for their movements and access to water. These incursions were followed or preceded by South African strikes into Angola using mechanized and light infantry against PLAN bases, which took place during the dry season when the South African vehicles could move through the dry bush.

Against the background of the war in the north and the continual diplomatic pressure from the United Nations, the South Africans tried to insist that “the long demanded independence of South West Africa must evolve by gradual and peaceful means” (Levinson 61). For the South Africans this meant a political arrangement in Namibia based on racial and ethnic divisions, and a Constitutional Conference was launched at the Turnhalle venue in Windhoek in September 1975. Although boycotted by SWAPO and a number of smaller black political groups, the Turnhalle Conference reached a decision in August 1976 to form a multi-racial interim government in early 1977 and a date was set for the independence of Namibia on 31 December 1978. This process was derailed by

¹² The quote from Nujoma’s interview was prominently displayed on the cover of Willem Steenkamp’s *Borderstrike!: South Africa into Angola* (1983), the closest to an official account of the cross-border raids by the SADF between 1978 and 1982.

the events of 1978, notably Operation Reindeer and the attack on Cassinga, and another decade of fighting was to follow before the real elections took place, under UN supervision, in November 1989.

In 1979, a new special police unit called *Koevoet* (Crowbar) was established. This introduced a brutal but effective system of tracking down and killing PLAN insurgents inside Namibia using a combination of police and mechanized infantry tactics (See Stiff). At the same time the South Africans began changing the political landscape within Namibia by dismantling the formal legal structure of apartheid in the territory and starting to recruit Namibians into the newly formed South West African Territorial Force (SWATF). The local force, based on ethnically defined units, notably the Ovambo 101 Battalion which played a support role in many of the cross-border raids, increasingly assumed responsibility for military operations in SWA/Namibia as the decade progressed.¹³

Throughout the 1980s, as a way of putting pressure on PLAN's organizational capacity, South Africa also provided covert support for the guerrilla war that continued to be waged in Angola by UNITA. The growing threat that UNITA represented to MPLA rule in Angola led in the mid-1980s to a series of massive co-ordinated military expeditions into southern Angola by MPLA forces supported by Cuban troops with Soviet and East European technical advisors. To prevent the annihilation of an important ally in their war against PLAN, the South Africans brought in their own conventional forces to stop the advances against the UNITA headquarters in Jamba in the south-eastern corner of Angola. These interventions culminated in a series of bloody but inconclusive land battles around the town of Cuito Cuanavale between November 1987 and April 1988 (Heitman 337-347; Scholtz, *The SADF in the Border War* 338-60).

¹³ Annette Seegers records that "by 1982, more than 30% of all troops in Namibia belonged to SWATF. By 1988, the figure had grown to about 72% or roughly 30, 000 men" (221).

A breakthrough in the seemingly interminable talks about the ceasefire and elections came soon after a military stalemate had come into being in southern Angola. An agreement among the South Africans, Cubans and Angolans, brokered by the Americans, was reached on a ceasefire, linked to the phased withdrawal of the Cubans from Angola and the South African forces from Namibia, which was to be followed by United Nations-administered elections in Namibia. Although a ceasefire had already been declared, the last bloody phase of the war began on April 1 1989, when large numbers of PLAN insurgents attempted to move south across the border into Namibia during the withdrawal of the South African forces. Using mostly police and SWATF units the South Africans opposed the movement and in the so-called '9 Day War' over 261 PLAN and 26 SWATF combatants were killed before an end to the PLAN infiltration was negotiated.

Despite the violence that had erupted in April, the November elections were conducted in a largely peaceful atmosphere and were formally certified by the United Nations Special Representative for Namibia, Martti Ahtisaari, as "free and fair". SWAPO won a convincing victory of 57% of the vote; yet this was balanced by a significant number of votes for the internal parties. The result was a multi-party democracy on liberal constitutional principles (Wren n.p.).

The conclusion of the war in Namibia in 1989 was overshadowed for South Africans by the dramatic political changes in South Africa itself, notably the unbanning of the ANC in 1990 and the negotiations that led to the first non-racial democratic elections in April 1994.

Back in the newly renamed Namibia, a decision was taken by the SWAPO government to issue a general pardon and a 'forgive-and-forget' approach towards the war was encouraged. Ian Liebenberg argues in favour of this policy in the Namibian context:

Despite criticism of the lack of a TRC in Namibia, the choice can be rationalized. Namibians were caught up in the politics of a frontier army and an occupier/colonial power and primary agent of oppression that left

Namibia, and a different approach may have unjustly pitched Namibian people against one another. (261)

In South Africa there was, and has been ever since, an intense focus on the internal struggles that contributed to the fall of apartheid. As a result, two decades after the conclusion of South Africa's 'Border War' in Namibia/Angola, the conflict and its ramifications at the political, social, and individual level in South Africa are only beginning to be explored. In their 2009 review of the current state of historical writing on the war, the military historians Ian van der Waag and Deon Visser conclude that "[t]he history of the Bush War, or Border War, The Angolan Conflict, call it what you will, remains unwritten. Too little time has elapsed, emotions run high and wounds inflicted are painful, exposed and they refuse to heal" (139).

In the absence of an agreed history, the role of memory becomes more significant. The American cultural theorist, Marita Sturken, has argued that history, cultural (or collective) memory, and individual memory have a fluid and vacillating relationship in which memory and history are "entangled" in an often antagonistic relationship (*Tangled Memories* 5). In a situation such as that of the South African Border War, where no accepted historical account has been produced, the movement between individual memories and cultural memories becomes significantly more acute. This situation is not unprecedented. For example, Max Hastings observes that:

To this day, France has not produced an official history of its war experience, and probably will never do so, because consensual support for any version of events would be unobtainable. It is striking that the most persuasive modern studies of the French wartime era have been written by American and British authors: relatively few indigenous scholars wish to address it. (660-61)

Regarding the above chronology of the South African war in Namibia/Angola, two issues must be stressed: first, the existence of contested accounts of the war and the improbability, perhaps even the impossibility, of a consensus being reached in an accepted history; and second, the irrelevance of the war to the new

South African rulers. For these reasons, the negotiations around the meaning and significance of the war have largely been continued outside of the public domain.

4. A Secret War

During the years of the war, the South African government and military were exceptionally successful in keeping the full extent of the war from the South African public. Through a variety of mechanisms, including outright censorship and management of the news process, the South African public was kept ignorant of the scale and intensity of the warfare on the Namibian border.

The police actions in the early years of the struggle were barely registered in the South African media and were largely overshadowed by events in Rhodesia.¹⁴ With the deployment of an SADF force which included conscripts into Namibia in 1974 a blanket of secrecy was imposed on the conflict. Significantly, the circumstances surrounding the death of the first member of the SADF to be killed on the Namibian border, Lt Freddie Zillie, were

shrouded in secrecy – not even his parents were told exactly when and where he died – and remain so to this day. At the time it was not even known what unit he belonged to, although a green infantry beret lay with his sword on his coffin when he was buried with full military honours at his hometown of Alberton, Johannesburg [. . .]. (Steenkamp *South Africa's Border War* 29)

The activities of the SADF were kept from public knowledge by a maze of security legislation, notably the Defence Act of 1957, which was tightened up by a series of amendments that were successively pushed through Parliament during the years of the conflict in Namibia. The 1957 Defence Act was amended in 1967; and again by amendment 42 in 1974; yet again with amendment 83 in

¹⁴ Steenkamp points out that the South African media were more concerned with the high casualty rate amongst South African Police serving in Rhodesia at that time. As a result, “to the average South African, what was happening in Rhodesia was a great deal more real and immediate than events in the faraway bushlands of Ovamboland and Caprivi” (*South Africa's Border War* 26).

1974; followed by 1 of 1976; 35 of 1977; 68 of 1977; 49 of 1978; 77 of 1980, and 44 of 1982. Of particular importance for this study is the provision in Section 118 (1) of the original 1957 Act:

- 1) No person shall, unless authorized thereto by the Minister of Defense or on his authority, –
 - a) Take any photograph or make any sketch, plan, model or note of any military camp, barracks, dockyard, installation or other premises ... used for military or defence purposes;
 - b) Have in his possession in or on such a camp ... any camera or other apparatus which may be used for the taking of photographs.
- (Breytenbach, "The Manipulation of Public Opinion" 176)

Initially these laws were used to control information about the SADF deployment in Namibia in 1974. In 1975, however, the laws were used to impose a complete blackout of any coverage by the South African media of the direct intervention by the SADF forces in the Angolan civil war. As previously noted, the South African government, with the encouragement of certain groups in US intelligence, seems to have intended to change the balance of power in the civil war that had broken out between the main Angolan liberation movements following the Portuguese withdrawal. A South African military force was sent into Angola in August 1975, without the authority of parliament – an unprecedented move in South African politics. Although news and photographs of the South African intervention were published in foreign media, no mention of the intervention was allowed in the South African media until after the intervention was concluded and the South African forces had withdrawn back across the South West African border in March 1976. It was a news blackout that lasted eight months!

So severe was the secrecy of the intervention that the South African soldiers involved were told to lie about their origins, and, if questioned, to pretend to be mercenaries. Fred Bridgland, the British journalist who revealed the involvement of South African forces in the Angolan War, describes his surprise at his first encounter with South Africans at Silva Porto (now Kuito) airport in September 1975, where he was covering what he believed to be "the UNITA end of the conflict" for the Reuters News Agency:

I ambled across to one of the armoured cars, in which sat a slight teenage white man with a thin, scraggy beard. I greeted him in Portuguese. When that brought no response I asked him in English what language he spoke. "English," he replied – except that the gravelly accent was a product of southern Africa, not some genteel English county. I asked him where he came from and he replied grudgingly and gutturally: "I am from Ingerland." (6)

After three months of further investigation, on November 14th Bridgland was confident enough to write a story about the South African invasion: "I filed the copy that day [from Lusaka] and it became front page news around the world – except in South Africa, where it was censored" (11).

As Graeme Addison shows in his study of censorship in South Africa during this period, the government's attempt to impose a complete local news blackout over the Angolan intervention backfired on them, causing frustration for the local media and provoking a flurry of rumours amongst the population. As a result of this experience, the government moved towards a more sophisticated policy of news manipulation.

Following the Angolan intervention, an agreement was reached between the government and the National Press Union (a body representing the major media owners) to form a combined Media-Defence committee in order to manage information about the activities of the SADF. Addison's comment on this development is that "despite the lip service paid to the principle of freedom of information [. . .] the Defence Committee would become the prime agency of collaboration in a system of propaganda" (115) controlled by the government and the military. One of the first actions of the Committee was to endorse a request from the Minister of Defence not to publish any information about South African prisoners of war held in Angola. Meanwhile the SADF reformed its own Directorate of Public Relations, staffed it with Afrikaans ex-journalists, and set up a Media Information Centre to release filtered information to the media (Addison 117). Using a system of only accrediting certain defence correspondents from the media, and maintaining carefully controlled access to the operational areas, where correspondents were kept under tight military

supervision, the SADF was able to manage the flow of information about the war in the Namibia and Angola.

5. The Vietnam Influence

The first South African invasion of Angola took place shortly after the final collapse of the American war in Vietnam, when Saigon fell to the Vietnam People's Army in April 1975. As we have seen, the South Africans claimed to have acted with the support of figures within the American administration, who interpreted the civil war in Angola as a new area of contestation in the Cold War. The failed American intervention in Vietnam had a profound influence on many aspects of the South African war effort, most notably in the government's attempt to control the representation of the war in South Africa. The Prime Minister, B. J. Vorster, speaking in Parliament in January 1976 to justify government control of information about the recent military intervention into Angola, made the connection with the media coverage of Vietnam very explicit:

Whilst I am on this point let me say something in respect of which I am sure all honourable members who take it seriously will agree with me: America lost the war in Vietnam because *inter alia* the Press was too much involved with that war. (qtd. in Addison 53-54)

However, the South African control of information about the war was not simply a reaction to beliefs about the media coverage of the Vietnam war. This control was an integral aspect of a larger policy of control and manipulation called 'total strategy,' which became government policy after the Minister of Defence, P.W. Botha, became Prime Minister in 1978. This policy of 'total strategy,' initially employed in Namibia from 1974, aimed to co-ordinate all aspects of South African society in the struggle against a 'total onslaught' by the communist and black nationalist opponents of apartheid.

The political philosopher, Philip Frankel, recognized that total strategy was a complex development derived from deep historical roots. Writing in 1984, he observed that:

the current militarization of South African society, the growth of the garrison state with its accompanying siege culture and the emergence of so-called 'total strategy' represent a basic reinvigoration of the commando ethic in the traditional heartland of Afrikaner political culture. (*Pretoria's Praetorians* xxii)

'Total strategy' was not only an atavistic revival of the commando ethic; it was also strongly informed by a modern intellectual component, in particular the ideas of the French military theorist, André Beaufre, which sensitized the South African military leadership to the power of media representations. Beaufre was a senior officer with direct experience of the guerrilla wars in Algeria and Indochina who went on to represent the French military in the NATO Standing Group in Washington. He was best known for his innovative approaches to devising new forms of military strategy under the shadow of nuclear deterrence. The term 'total strategy' was in fact coined by Beaufre in his influential text, *An Introduction to Strategy* which appeared in an English translation in 1965:

At the top of the pyramid and under the direct control of [. . .] the political authority – is *total strategy*, whose task is to define how total war should be conducted. Its task is to lay down the object for each specialized category of strategy and the manner in which all – political, economic, diplomatic, and military – should be woven together. (30, italics in original)

Frankel writes:

The appreciation by the SADF that the news media are an essential link in the 'total strategy,' its frequently reported attempts to manipulate the press in the interests of promoting the image of the Defence Force [. . .] are some of the multiple manifestations of the military's belief that ideas are as potent as weapons in the conduct of counter-revolutionary warfare. (58)

In addition, the SADF, although led by a core of professional soldiers, was primarily a 'citizens' army,' with the majority of its ranks made up of conscripts. Frankel estimated that the National Service system provided 46% of the SADF's manpower (12). This, of course, made the military extremely vulnerable to perceptions of the war by the South African (white) public. Casualties among national servicemen could not be kept hidden from their relatives in South Africa.

Significantly, this was the weak point in the government's attempt to maintain a total news blackout during the Angolan intervention in 1975. One of the most defiant gestures against the news blackout was made by the *Rand Daily Mail* in its edition of Tuesday 18 November, when it published a front page lead entitled "More Servicemen Killed in Action" followed by a 15 cm double-column blank space topped by a photograph of one of the casualties, Lt Christopher Robin, together with "a facsimile of the private death notice" which the deceased soldier's family had placed in the newspaper's own classified section on the day before. The military authorities, who had informed the family of their son's death during the weekend, could not prevent the family from placing a death notice in their local newspaper, while the newspaper could not be prevented from re-printing that same death notice as a reminder of the major news story that was being kept hidden from the South African public (Addison 183).

The Rand Daily Mail's blank space was a rare gesture. As Addison has shown, the subsequent system of controlled censorship and manipulation of the news media's need for stories and images was largely successful. The SADF was able to keep the reality of the war out of the purview of the South African public. Although the news of SADF deaths could not be kept from the South African media, the actual extent of the operations and images of dead or injured South Africans were rigorously excluded from the South African public's visual awareness. In addition, the South African combatants themselves were forbidden to discuss the war with civilians, with the threat of being prosecuted for revealing military secrets. This factor, allied to the general difficulty that veterans of conflict have in speaking about their experiences to those who have not themselves been in such circumstances, further suppressed public discussion of the war.

In the years following the war, the public memory of the conflict has been further repressed by uncertainties surrounding the significance of the war in a newly democratic South Africa. Since 1989, the memory of the war has been overshadowed for many participants by the shame of complicity in the defence of the policy of apartheid. During the war, the conflict was presented by the

South African government as a battle against the tide of communism, as a crucial front in the Cold War. This view was questioned by the discourse of the End Conscription Campaign (Nathan 312) and was officially rejected after the first democratic elections when veterans found themselves tarred as the dogs of apartheid. As the title of a recent collection of poetry and prose written by South African conscripts during the Border War emphasizes, their memories are “a secret burden” at the individual level, while at the social level the effects of the war continue to resonate (Batley, *A Secret Burden* xiv).

6. A Possibility of Speech: The Truth and Reconciliation Commission

Established in 1994 in the euphoria of the first democratic elections and the inauguration of Nelson Mandela as the country’s first black president, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was mandated “with investigating and documenting gross human rights violations that occurred during the conflicts of the past, which took place inside *and outside* (my emphasis) South Africa between 1 March 1960 and 5 December 1993” (Boraine 48). The Commission was enjoined by its founding Act to reveal the truth in an even-handed manner about events both inside and outside the country during this period. The methodology for this process was based upon its own research and the testimony of victims of abuse, together with information provided in amnesty applications by perpetrators of human rights abuses.

Although the impact of the TRC was immense, particularly through the emotive testimonies given by victims to public sessions of the committee, the actual extent of the TRC’s investigations was limited by both the restricted time granted for the process and by the methodology and orientation of the Commission. In her careful analysis of the Commission’s final report, Anthea Jeffery has shown that the majority of deaths inside South Africa which occurred in the period 1990–1994 were not investigated because of political limitations. This was even more apparent in the investigation of abuses outside South Africa, where the TRC recognized that the great majority of abuses occurred (TRC Report 2:42). The investigation was hampered by questions concerning the

legality of amnesty granted for activities in other territories, the restricted time available, and the TRC's perceived bias against the SADF. The TRC chose to focus on only two aspects of the war: the Cassinga Raid and the activities of the special police unit, Koevoet. In contrast with the investigations into abuses in South Africa, these sessions had no victim testimonies. Oddly there was also no representation from PLAN/SWAPO,¹⁵ and the session which investigated Cassinga¹⁶ therefore focused only on the SADF operational plans. The findings were less than conclusive. The Commission reluctantly accepted that "Kassinga was both a military base and a refugee camp" (TRC Report 2,2:56), but denied that the SADF had the right of pre-emptive strike "for the simple reason" that South Africa's occupation of South West Africa was illegal.

Although the South African unit which attacked the Cassinga camp included soldiers from the Citizen Force, the investigations into Cassinga and the operations of Koevoet did not provide a space for articulating the experiences of SADF conscripts. Conscriptio was considered by one of the special hearings intended to understand "the antecedents, circumstances, factors and context within which gross violations of human rights occurred" (TRC Vol 4 1). Obviously the system of conscription was one of the most important "environments" in which the conflicts of the past occurred, but the hearing on military service in 1997 was organized by prominent members of the End Conscriptio Campaign. As a result, men who had not experienced conscription dominated the presentations. Of the only fifteen people who testified, or submitted written testimonies to the hearing on conscription, only three were actual conscripts (out of the estimated 600,000 men who went through National Service), and of those three, only two had ever experienced combat. The most prominent voices at the hearing were either conscientious objectors or the leaders of anti-

¹⁵ In fact the Namibian government turned down a request from the TRC to hold these hearings in Windhoek, arguing that "[this] will not contribute to our efforts to bring about reconciliation" (qtd. in Liebenberg 261).

¹⁶ Cassinga – spelt with a 'C' – was the original Portuguese name for the town and is the version used in all SADF accounts; but the name is usually spelt with an 'K' in accounts by SWAPO and SWAPO sympathizers. It is telling that the TRC chose to use Kassinga as the reference in their report.

conscription groupings such as the End Conscription Campaign or the Congress of South African War Resisters.

As a result, the activities of the War were never subjected to the kind of public scrutiny that the violence and human cost of the political struggle inside South Africa received after 1994. The activities of the TRC also worked to structure experience as either that of victim or perpetrator, an opposition that did not perhaps conform to the perceptions of most ex-conscripts. Therefore one of the effects of the TRC's investigations was to make ex-conscripts even more reluctant to talk about their own experiences in public. The TRC's final report reveals the lack of participation by SADF veterans:

On the side of the former government and security forces, 256 (87 per cent) came from the former South African Police (SAP) members and 31 (11 per cent) from the former South African Defence Force (SADF) (two from white conscripts). (Foster et al 15)

Although it did not facilitate any significant degree of speech by SADF veterans, the Commission did, as I will argue in a later chapter, play a significant role in setting the conditions in which it would be possible for veterans to speak about their war experiences.

7. Vietnam: The Distorting Mirror

We have seen that the first major escalation of the war, the South African intervention in Angola in 1975, took place in the wake of the American failure in Vietnam. The shadows of the conflict that divided America and ended with the embassy staff fleeing in helicopters as the North Vietnamese Army stormed into Saigon strongly influenced not just the tactics of the intervention but also the government's determination to control the media coverage of the war. Vietnam, however, was not just a negative example that influenced the censorship of information about the war in South Africa. The war in Vietnam was also, due to the invisibility of the South African war, a powerful influence on the representation of the South African experience.

The Border War has often been called 'South Africa's Vietnam.' The South African historian Gary Baines argues that "the Vietnam War provided a framework for imagining the Border War" ("South Africa's Vietnam" 3). In fact the experience of the Border War was profoundly different, not least because of the perception, created by the apartheid government and by most South African forces, that the struggle was directly related to the survival of South Africa as they knew it.

The contrast between the access enjoyed by media to the Vietnam War and the control of images from the Border War was striking. In Vietnam, because the conflict was defined as a 'limited war' in which the United States military were 'guests' of the South Vietnamese government, censorship was "politically impractical" (Hallin 9). The media were allowed freedom of movement and unrestricted photographic opportunities on the front lines. Daniel Hallin describes this unique situation in his study entitled *The Uncensored War*: "For the first time in the twentieth century the media were able to cover a war with nearly the freedom they have covering political news in the United States"(9). This led to an unprecedented coverage of the war in all its contradictions and the subsequent perception amongst many American politicians (notably Richard Nixon) that the war was lost because of media representations (Addison 54). As we have seen, the South African government shared this perception.

Vietnam has been described as the first televised war, which brought images of death and destruction into every American home, but the effect of this coverage has been exaggerated. As William Hammond points out, the reality was rather different:

American television viewers, contrary to allegations by critics of the news media, were rarely treated to scenes depicting the war in all its bloody detail. [...] Instead [...] viewers received a distanced overview composed mainly of scenes of helicopters landing, tall grasses blowing [...] soldiers fanning out [...] rifles at the ready, with now and then (on the sound track) a far-off ping or two, and [...] (as the visual grand finale) a column of dark, billowing smoke a half mile away, invariably described as a burning Viet Cong ammo dump. (75)

In fact, the “visceral grimness” (Hallin 74) of the war was communicated through the still photographs of correspondents such as Larry Burrows, Philip Jones Griffiths, David Douglas Dunn, Catherine Leroy and Don McCullin. The power of photographic representation of the war became evident at an early stage in the conflict, with the attempts by the South Vietnamese government to suppress the internal opposition to the war by Buddhists: “Perhaps the high point came on 11 June 1963, when AP reporter Malcolm Browne photographed a Buddhist monk as the man set himself ablaze to protest Diem’s policies. The picture went around the world” (Hammond 10). It was followed by a flood of other images which brought the war and its effect on American soldiers and the Vietnamese civilian population into sharp focus and vivid colour. The historian of war photography Jorge Lewinski lists the extent of the photographic coverage of the war:

The country, the village, its inhabitants; the American war machine, its origins, operation, constituent parts, its human element of soldiers and administrators; the interactions and relationships between the cultures of east and west, corruption, graft, drug-taking, prostitution; the degeneration of the soldiers; the misery of the people; the devastation; the slaughter. (215)

The lesson of Vietnam was, of course, not learnt by the South African government alone. The conflicts that followed the Vietnam War were conspicuously managed by the Western military to prevent uncontrolled media access. The British handling of the Falklands War in 1982 was perhaps typical of the post-Vietnam scenario. Of the 160 journalists who applied for accreditation to travel to the operational area only seventeen newspaper reporters, two photographers, two radio reporters and three television reporters with five technicians were allowed to sail with the Task Force to the war. One of the photographers who applied but was refused accreditation was Don McCullin, the British war photographer whose images figured so prominently in the coverage of the Vietnam War. In America, the Reagan administration in 1983, “with the example of Vietnam once again in mind, excluded the media from the opening phase of the invasion of Grenada” (Hallin 4).

The result is that the Vietnam War, at least until the First and Second Wars in Iraq, provided the visual correlative for all proxy conflicts in the late Cold War period. This was especially the case for the visual understanding of South African's Border War. In a seminar series run by the History Department at the University of Cape Town, it was reported that "Vietnam War films, for some of our students, seemed more authentic than most of South Africa's Border War films" (qtd. in Marx 95).

The Vietnam parallel appealed to the End Conscription Campaign (ECC) and haunted the strategic thinking of the SADF – but the crucial difference was that Vietnam was the most visual war. By contrast, the Border War, together with its impact on the civilian populations of southern Angola and northern Namibia, and its effect on the South African forces, was largely invisible within South Africa. The result was that the visual understanding of the Border War was largely overshadowed and subsumed by the representation of another, very different war, the American war in the jungles of Vietnam. In visual terms, the Vietnam War became paradigmatic of counter-insurgency war in general.

8. A Story Of Three Different Memorials

As Lesley Marx has recognized, despite the parallels which have been drawn between the Border War and the Vietnam War, "a key difference" (92) lies in the stories of the attempts to erect memorials to the two different wars.

Many commentators have remarked on the profound impact of the Vietnam War memorial in Washington in resolving the alienation felt by many of the veterans of that conflict. Robert Pogue Harrison describes the remarkable effect of the Vietnam memorial on the day of its opening:

November 13, 1982, was an unforgettable day in America. Over 150,000 people, many of them Vietnam veterans, descended on Washington for the opening of the Vietnam memorial. Wheelchairs, fatigues, old army jackets, and a sea of decorations followed the brass parade toward the park between the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument. After the sundry speeches, when the fences guarding the memorial finally came

down, there was a prolonged, uneasy silence as people surveyed the wall, approached it, touched it, walked along it, searched it for names of fallen kin or comrades. One by one, veterans began to break down. Strangers embraced, weeping in each other's arms. Mothers, fathers, wives, daughters, sons, relatives, and friends of the dead also broke down, and before long the scene of spontaneous grief moved reporters and broadcasters to tears as well. (186)

In the years following the war in Vietnam, the veterans "returned to a country intent on forgetting them and the war they had not won" (Hawkins 754). Not only was Vietnam the first defeat suffered by America, it had raised great divisions in the American public and had produced deeply disturbing revelations about the conduct of the American forces. To an exceptional degree the Vietnam memorial "transform[ed] the national response to Vietnam" (Hawkins 754) and thus allowed the veterans a way of reintegrating their experiences into the fabric of American experience.

The memorial project was "a grass-roots effort" driven by a group of ordinary Vietnam veterans led by Jan Scruggs. A man haunted by his experiences in Vietnam, Scruggs had an intuitive understanding of the need to separate the soldiers from the war (Turner 174). This vision was shared by the committee which he formed to decide on the choice of design from a national design competition. Their vision was embodied in the criteria for the national competition which called for a memorial that was "reflective and contemplative in character; harmonized with its surroundings; contain[ed] the names of all who died in the conflict; and avoid[ed] political statements" (Greenberg, "The Power of a Name" n.pag.).

A young Chinese-American undergraduate architect, Maya Lin, who was 8 years old at the time of the Tet offensive in 1968, submitted the design eventually chosen by the committee. Her plan – inspired by the great World War I memorial by Sir Edward Lutyens – used the names of the fallen, but pared the design to a starkly minimalist geometric of two intersecting walls set into the ground. It was a startlingly severe approach and the antithesis of the realist war memorial architecture familiar to most Americans.

Not surprisingly her design was also controversial. A rival grouping of veterans, condemned the proposed design as “a black gash of shame” and “the most insulting and demeaning memorial to our experience that was possible” (qtd. in Haines 207). After failing to push through an alternative design they proposed as an addition to the memorial a realistic representation, a statue showing an idealized trio of soldiers, dressed in recognizable Vietnam-era uniforms and carrying issue kit. The result was a compromise, bitterly and unsuccessfully contested by Maya Lin, with the realist sculpture placed at a short distance from the apex of the two memorial walls.

Yet as the response at the 1982 unveiling of the memorial testified, it was Lin’s design that resonated with the American public. The memorial has been profoundly popular, has attracted millions of visitors and has been featured in numerous magazine publications and books. Perhaps most significantly it has given rise to another informal form of memorial – the mementoes left at the Wall by visitors. Ranging from letters to bits and pieces of military kit, to odd things like women’s underwear and toys, the quantity has been such that a dedicated museum has been established to house just these mementoes.

At the heart of Lin’s design was the presentation of the names of the dead. The black marble walls of the memorial featured more than 58,000 names, without identification of military rank or unit, a democracy of the dead, listed simply in the order in which they died or went missing. The effect for visitors has been described as like looking for the dead bodies after a battle: an effect that perhaps inadvertently echoes the first images of American war dead, the corpses scattered across the fields of Gettysberg in the Civil War photographs of Matthew Brody.

We must also recognize that Lin’s design was primarily therapeutic. In Lin’s own words, the intention of her design was that “the [wall] was built as a very psychological memorial. It’s not meant to be cheerful or happy, but to bring out in people the realization of loss and a cathartic healing process” (qtd. in Turner

177). Treating the consequences of the war as traumatic and the memorial as a therapeutic intervention were at the root of the design's success (Capps 272).

At one point it looked as if the establishment of Freedom Park on a hilltop opposite the Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria would provide a similar catharsis for Border War veterans. Built in response to one of the nation-building proposals of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the park was intended to provide "symbolic reparation for victims of past atrocities" with the aim of recognizing the "events that shaped the nature and character" of South Africa (*freedompark.co.za* n.pag.). With its stated goals of uniting the nation in an understanding and recognition of its complex history, one which includes the various tribal wars and the Boer resistance to British colonialism, as well as the First and Second World Wars, the monument seemed to offer an opportunity similar to the Vietnam War memorial in Washington. As stated on the official website: "On the crest of Salvokop, subtly blending into the curves of the hill, nestles S'khumbuto – Freedom Park's major memorial element. It stands as a testimony to the various conflicts that have shaped the South Africa of today" (*freedompark.co.za* n.pag.). The most prominent aspect of the S'khumbuto is the Wall of Names "reminiscent of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington" (Marx 92). According to the official website, the Wall can eventually accommodate 120,000 names; to date, 75 000 have been approved for inclusion. Unlike Lin's memorial the S'khumbuto Wall does not remember a particular conflict but is intended to record the casualties of the eight conflicts¹⁷ which have "made South Africa what it is." The design also allows for "future generations to memorialize their heroes and heroines" (*freedompark.co.za* n.pag.).

In March 2006, a call for Public Participation in the Collection of Names for S'khumbuto (Memorial) went out with the following appeal: "The public is invited to submit the names of family, relatives and friends they feel made a contribution to the freedom we experience today" (*freedompark.co.za* n.pag.).

¹⁷ These eight conflicts are listed as Pre-Colonial Wars; Slavery; Genocide; Wars of Resistance; the South African War; the First World War; the Second World War; and the Struggle for Liberation.

SADF veterans associations submitted lists of the men killed in the Border War. Their lists were “summarily rejected” by the Freedom Park Trust. The wall, the Trust insisted, was for those who died for human freedom. (Baines, “Site of Struggle” 335)

Was this a lost opportunity? Gary Baines seems undecided (“Site of Struggle” 339), as do the Freedom Park directors who have apparently agreed to record the names of the SADF border dead in their database while still refusing to include them on the S'khumbuto wall.

The result has been a separate SADF Wall of Remembrance erected by the veteran associations in 2009 on the hill directly below the Voortrekker Monument. Like the Vietnam memorial, this is also a privately funded initiative, but the Wall completely lacks the emotional potency of the Washington design. The names of the SADF war dead are recorded with their rank and date of death but are grouped according to the different arms of the service in which they served: army, air force, navy, medical corps. Unlike Lin’s memorial, the SADF monument does not separate the soldiers from the war. The choice of location, beneath the Voortrekker Monument, both literally and metaphorically overshadows the memory of the Border War with the bitter pathos of the Afrikaner foundation myth.

As the SADF veterans associations discovered, it is hard to claim that the SADF was fighting for freedom and humanity, particularly to a Freedom Park management committee made up of members of the liberation movement. Yet as the Vietnam memorial testifies, it is not uncommon for people to have to fight, suffer and lose their lives in a war they do not necessarily believe in. The therapeutic de-politicization of the Vietnam War that was achieved with the Washington memorial is perhaps not available or appropriate in the context of a civil war/liberation struggle. It is important to note that the resolution achieved by the Vietnam Memorial is a result of its being situated in America and not including the names of the estimated millions of Vietnamese (from both the North and the South) who died in that conflict.

The burden of dealing with their memories of the war and finding a place for those accounts in the emerging national discourse of post-apartheid South Africa by South African veterans would have to be dealt with elsewhere and in other ways. This burden is all the heavier for stemming from a war that was effectively rendered invisible by the government during the conflict and that became even more invisible under a new government that has shown a tendency to marginalize all non-ANC forms of struggle¹⁸.

¹⁸ As Frankel points out, the victims of the 1960 Sharpeville massacre have yet to receive an appropriate memorial: “precious little has been done to concretise the massacre in commemorative terms. [. . .] It is far easier to [. . .] testimonialise the past to suit the agendas of those with power in the present” (*An Ordinary Atrocity* 218).

CHAPTER 2 TRAUMA AND THE LITERARY ARCHIVE OF THE WAR

1. Introduction

Although a generally accepted formal history of the Border War remains unwritten, and can perhaps never be conclusively written, several other forms of writing about the conflict have appeared since the end of hostilities in 1989. Of particular relevance to this study is a form of first-person narration that has proliferated since 2005. Explicitly seeking to engage with the psychic wounds of the war, these narratives are memoirs written by English-speaking conscripts who personally experienced aspects of the war on the northern Namibian border with Angola. The memoirs, which will be examined in this chapter, include:

Antony Feinstein, *Battle Scarred: Hidden Costs of the Border War* (1998/2011);

Rick Andrew, *Buried in the Sky* (2001);

Clive Holt, *At Thy Call We Did Not Falter* (2005);

Steven Webb, *Ops Medic: A National Serviceman's Border War* (2008);

Peter Tucker & Marius van Niekerk, *Behind the Lines of the Mind: Healing the Mental Scars of War* (2009);

Timothy Ramsden, *Border-Line Insanity: A National Serviceman's Story* (2009);

Granger Korff, *19 with a Bullet: A South African Paratrooper in Angola* (2009).

In this chapter, I argue that the authors of these memoirs present themselves as haunted by traumatic memories of their wartime experience and seek to purge themselves of the effects of these memories through a process of public narration. In this sense the memoirs are trauma narratives; but I will argue that a particular definition of trauma, the medical diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (introduced subsequent to the Vietnam War), plays a vital role in legitimizing the experiences of these mostly English-speaking conscripts in the Border War, and in helping them to separate themselves from the policy of apartheid. Through an analysis of the genealogy of the PTSD diagnosis I will

show how the medicalization of their war experiences has the effect of blurring the distinction between perpetrators and victims. This interpretation of their experiences allows the authors to receive compassion, but conversely also allows those guilty of human rights abuses to absolve themselves of any responsibility for their actions.

This new genre of conscript memoir must be differentiated from other forms of writing that appeared during or after the war.¹⁹ Amongst the other forms to be examined in this chapter are the 'heroic' reminiscences written by senior South African military figures and special forces operatives, and the Afrikaans literary genre that became known as *grensliteratuur*.

2. 'Heroic' writing and other forms of writing about the Border War

To date several accounts have been published by senior South African military figures. These include the ex-Minister of Defence, General Magnus Malan; the ex-Chief of the South African Defence Force, General Jannie Geldenhuys; and the Commander of the Cassinga Parachute Brigade, Colonel Jan Breytenbach.²⁰ As the title of Geldenhuys's account in its original Afrikaans edition – *Dié wat wen* –

¹⁹ Danielle Graham in her 2005 M.A. study of white SADF veteran perspectives identifies three strands of retrospective discourse on the Border War. These are the perspectives of the 'Generals,' of members of the 'elite' forces, and of what she calls the 'non-elite.' The third category includes conscripts but Graham does not recognize trauma as a fundamental device in their accounts. Gary Baines, in his essay "South Africa's Vietnam: Literary History and Cultural Memory of the Border War" (2004), identifies four categories of writing about the Border War: military history, left-leaning academic writing, Afrikaans *grensliteratuur*, and the "confessional narratives" written by "white English-speaking national servicemen." While he recognizes that these confessional narratives are part of a "cathartic literature" and that they register the influence of the Vietnam War, Baines does not explore the formal narrative gestures used in these texts to suggest trauma.

²⁰ See Jannie Geldenhuys, *A General's Story: From an Era of War and Peace* (1995), originally published in Afrikaans as *Dié Wat Wen* (1994); Magnus Malan, *My Life with the South African Defence Force* (2006), originally published in Afrikaans as *My lewe saam met die SA Weermag* (2005); and Jan Breytenbach, *Eagle Strike: The Controversial Airborne Assault on Cassinga* (2008).

makes explicit, these senior figures have been at pains to use their memoirs to justify their strategies and to argue that the SADF, under their leadership, was the real victor in the Angolan War. General Malan, in his autobiography, goes so far as to claim that “few countries in the world will be able to equal our military successes [. . .] . The outstanding achievement was that we never suffered a defeat during this lengthy physical struggle” (434). For the reasons outlined in the first chapter of this study, this debate is likely to remain inconclusive and partisan. In contrast with these exercises in self-justification written by the old SADF hierarchy, the conscript memoirs that are the focus of this chapter are less concerned with the military implications of the war than with presenting their anti-heroic individual experiences of the war. The conscript authors grapple with the effects that the conflict had on them as participants, and seek through the process of writing to heal the psychic wounds sustained during the war.

The genre of conscript memoirs must also be distinguished from numbers of ‘heroic’ first-person accounts produced by members of units such as Reconnaissance Commando and 32 Battalion.²¹ The majority written in Afrikaans, these narratives present unapologetic visions of heroic adventures in the Angolan bush undertaken by men who were regarded as superhuman warriors at the time. As such this writing fits into the international category of ‘special forces porn,’ but with an exotic African background. By contrast, the memoirs produced by English-speaking conscripts have, with some exceptions, tended to come from ordinary servicemen, some of whom had no direct contact with the enemy. In this sense these narratives are anti-heroic, and it is perhaps significant that the only equivalent from an Afrikaans-speaking conscript to date has been the lightly fictionalised reminiscences of a gay man’s experience in the SADF, Andre van der Merwe’s novel *Moffie*. Van der Merwe’s narrator records an altercation that captures the marginalised status of both English-speakers and

²¹ Typical examples of this genre include: Paul Els, *We Fear Naught But God: The Story of the South African Special Forces* (2001); Jack Greef, *A Greater Share of Honour* (2001); André Diedericks, *Journey Without Boundaries: The Operational Life and Experiences of a SA Special Forces Small Team Operator* (2007); and Piet Nortje, *32 Battalion: The Inside Story of South Africa’s Elite Fighting Unit* (2003).

homosexuals in the SADF: “You English are a bunch of moffies, man. [. . .] they are wasting the government’s money on your okes [. . .]. This is our country. Us Afrikaaners (sic) will fight until the end, you’s just a *soutpiel*, man”(78) .

These conscript memoirs must also be distinguished from the mass of ‘subterranean’ discussions on websites and online forums amongst ex-SADF soldiers.²² Many of these chat forums are closed to outsiders, such as the *Koevoet* and *Parabat* websites. Although they share some features with the online discussion forums, the narratives of the conscripts that are analysed in this chapter have been published, and are thus in the public realm and available to a wider readership than ex-soldiers. I will argue that these narratives, operating as public speech, constitute a strand of discourse which potentially engages with larger national narratives about the meaning of the Border war. In this sense they offer counter-narratives to the dominant post-apartheid consensus on the war which has largely forgotten the SADF soldiers. In part these narratives present a differentiated white experience during apartheid, but engage with a particularly fraught aspect of white experience – the violent enforcement of government policy as members of the military.

3. Grensliteratuur

The English-speaking SADF post-war memoirs also contrast with a genre of writing which appeared during the war – the so-called *grensliteratuur*, which, as the title suggests, was produced by Afrikaans writers. The short-story from 1976 by J.C. Steyn, “*Op pad na die grens*,” which gave the name to the genre, is perhaps typical. The story is narrated by a young policeman who is preparing himself for departure to the northern Caprivi at the first stage of the war in Namibia, when it was still a police operation. Rather ominously, on the day before leaving South Africa for Namibia, he attends the funeral of a school friend, also a policeman, who has been killed in a landmine explosion on the border. After the funeral, he encounters the ghost of a young Afrikaner killed in the 1914 Rebellion and the

²² Some examples of the numerous online sites are www.sabov.co.za; www.sa-soldier.com; and www.sadfgroup.org.

meeting leaves him heavy with misgivings about his history as an Afrikaner and his future. In Steyn's story, the *grens* is a complex metaphor which is extensively explored, not only as a geographical entity but as a division which separates Afrikaners from the other inhabitants of South Africa and which also divides the living from the dead and the living from each other politically. As the ghost of the young rebel mournfully points out to Steyn's narrator:

Daar is 'n soort grens tussen ons – ek verstaan nie meer alles wat aan jou kant van die grens gebeur nie en jy moenie dink dat jy die dinge sal verstaan wat aan my kant van die grens is nie. (25)

[*There is a kind of border between us – I don't understand everything that happens on your side of the border anymore and you mustn't think that you can understand the things on my side of the border.*]

Although some of the authors of the *grensliteratuur* had direct personal experience of the conflict, the border environment is presented in this genre of writing in deliberately vague and surreal terms.²³ In critic Susanna Kriel's estimation "*grensliteratuur* [. . .] portrays an alternative vision of history realities" (n.pag.). These fictional and metaphorical elements effectively turn the border into a literary liminal zone, and the name *grensliteratuur* tends to diminish the concrete associations with war. This suggests that the *grens* in this writing operates as a figure for divisions and changes of perspective within Afrikaner culture during the late 1970s and 1980s, with the Border/grens becoming a metaphor for experience no longer bound by everyday norms.²⁴

The difference between the writing of English-speaking veterans and the genre of *grensliteratuur* was recognized by the South African historian Gary Baines. Writing about the relationship between literary history and the cultural memory

²³ Other significant works in the genre include Louis Kruger, *'n Basis anderkant die grens* (1984); Alexander Strachan, *'n Wereld sonder grense* (1984); Etienne van Heerden, "My Kubaan, and Koos Prinsloo, "Grensverhaal" (1987).

²⁴ This is not to imply that there were no English language works produced during the war. Most, however were stage plays such as Antony Ackerman's *Somewhere on the Border* (1983) or the short story collection *Forces' Favourites* (1987). The majority of these works were less concerned with exploring the experience or meaning of the war than they were with making anti-war statements.

of the Border War, Baines differentiates between this Afrikaans writing and a confessional literature which is “representative of the experiences of white English-speaking national servicemen” (“South African’s Vietnam” 5). He does not, however, explore why it is English-speaking conscripts who have, in another phrase he uses, “broken ranks” and spoken about their experiences in this way (“Breaking Rank” 1).

4. The Limitations on Conscript Speech

As we have seen, these conscript memoirs proceed from a context where ex-conscripts’ speech about the war was restricted by a number of factors. The first were formal restrictions, discussed in the previous chapter, imposed during the conflict on the South African media. These restrictions meant that the South African public had a very limited understanding of the war and its severity. In addition to these restrictions on public discourse, most combatants were told that they could not speak about the details of their personal experiences for reasons of military security. On arrival at the border, after their initial training in South Africa, conscripts were issued with malaria tablets and, as one of them recalls: “almost vomiting from the tablets, we were ushered into a hall and given a wad of forms to sign. These included the State Security Act or some equally pompous document in which we swore not to divulge our activities to ‘lesser mortals’” (Thompson 95).

Regardless of whether or not conscripts were formally sworn to secrecy as in this example, all members of the SADF were legally silenced by one of the provisions of the Defence Act of 1957 which, as discussed in the previous chapter, was used to control information about any aspect of the security forces’ operations in South Africa and Namibia. In section 118 (4) it was specified that “it was an offence for a person to disclose any secret or confidential information relating to the defence of the country which came to his knowledge by reason of his membership of the SADF” (qtd. in Satchwell 48).

Soldiers experienced this control most concretely through the censorship of their personal letters. Troops in the operational area were forbidden to communicate any information about the war in their letters home. All letters written from the operational area were censored and any details about places or military activities were excised. Soldiers returning to South Africa on leave were also forbidden to speak about their experiences. The Parabat Marius van Niekerk refers to this aspect of control and the effect that it had on the conscripts as “the promise of silence you were forced to make every time you went on leave, and when you were demobbed. If there was something so secret that you couldn’t even tell your parents, there must be something wrong somewhere” (184).

After the war, speech was inhibited by the conscripts’ sense of a changed political climate following the unbanning of the ANC in 1990 and the first democratic elections in South Africa in 1994. J.H. Thompson, in her collection of recollections by SADF veterans, published in 2006 with the title *An Unpopular War: From Afkak to Bosbepok – Voices of South African National Servicemen*, refers bluntly to the difficulty of public speech for her subjects, the ex-combatants: “Today it is not socially acceptable for these men to talk about their experiences” (viii). Accordingly each memory in her collection was attributed with only the first name of the contributor, together with their age at the time of the war-time experience recalled in the collection. This view is corroborated by Karen Batley, another editor of Border War memories in the immediate post-war period. An academic specialist in the English poetry of the First World War, Batley began collecting poetry written by combatants during the border conflict shortly after the South African withdrawal from Namibia in 1989. At that time she was unable to find a publisher because “it was not politically correct to focus on these particular soldiers, [and] because the new democratic government had come into power” (xvi). Eventually published in 2007, her collection is entitled *A Secret Burden: Memories of the Border War by South African Soldiers Who Fought in It*. The “Secret Burden” is both a title of one of the poems in her collection and a reference to the difficulty that ex-combatants have experienced in sharing their wartime experiences in post-war South Africa.

The formal and political restrictions on the speech of ex-conscripts were not the only restraint on voicing counter-narratives. The culture of the SADF was harshly masculine. Showing signs of weakness or acknowledging fear was strongly frowned upon. Diana Gibson, a medical anthropologist who has examined this process amongst a group of SADF veterans, uses the image of opening up the “*balsak* in the roof.” A *balsak* (Afrikaans slang meaning scrotum) was the army-issue brown canvas duffel bag which soldiers used to carry their uniform and kit (215). Typically, after their period of national service, a man’s *balsak* was stored in the roof, out of sight, but never completely forgotten. Taking down the *balsak* from its storage place is an appropriate analogy for the process of conscripts speaking publically about the textures of their individual experience. As Gibson suggests, the *balsak* may function as a Pandora’s box, potentially revealing experiences which challenge the established discourses around the Border War.

Not only was the culture of the South African Army during the Border War rigidly masculine, it was also strongly Afrikaans. As Philip Frankel observed in his 1984 study of the sociology of the SADF:

the South African military is dominated by the Afrikaner segment of the white elite in a society where, despite the role of race in building elite cohesion, communal politics waged between English and Afrikaaner (sic) are still significant. (11)

This may explain why the first anti-heroic memoirs to appear were produced by English-speaking conscripts.

It is striking that the poems collected by Batley and the reminiscences gathered by Thompson are in English. I argue that the post-war memory of the conflict, in particular the representation of that experience as traumatic, has the function for members of the English-speaking white community of differentiating them from the ideology of apartheid in their response to the war. This is especially apparent in the full-length first-person memoirs that are the focus of this chapter.

This oblique relationship to the events of the Border War was specific to the experience of South African English-speaking conscripts. By contrast, the first published attempt by a white Rhodesian soldier to come to terms with his role on the losing side in Zimbabwe's liberation war (Schanche n.pag.), *White Man, Black War* by Bruce Moore-King, although written in English, does not engage with the diagnostic category of trauma at all. Quite the contrary, it is an angry diatribe against the perfidy of the white "Elders:" the older generation of Rhodesians who sent their sons into battle on the flimsy pretext of defending Christian civilisation against the Communist onslaught:

These we once called Elders, these who take such pride and pleasure in the pain and fear they sent their sons to endure, these twisted mentalities who calmly paid the annual fees for the lifestyles they enjoyed, those annual fees that were invoiced with their children's blood, these creatures are not supermen, not something special; just maggots who belong under a damp rock somewhere, protecting their fish belly whiteness from the light of the sun. (175)

Although one could argue that this rage is an expression of trauma, the significant difference from the attitude espoused in the South African memoirs is that the authors present their trauma as suffering, and do not display the anger towards an older generation which is so dominant in the Rhodesian conscript's account.

5. The First Conscript Memoirs

The first conscript memoir specifically to link Post Traumatic Stress Disorder with the experience of the Bush War was Clive Holt's *At Thy Call We Did Not Falter*. Holt's stated goals for his memoir were two-fold: on the one hand he sought to produce a narrative providing an accurate account of his experiences; but on the other hand, the narrative was to be a record of his overcoming the traumatic effect of those experiences through the process of writing. Holt writes about his experiences as a crew member in a Ratel armoured troop carrier during the ferocious conventional land battles in Angola that characterised the last phase of the war in 1988. In common with many of the memoirs, Holt's narrative is presented as both testimony and memorial: he concludes his

personal account with a “Roll of Honour” listing all those soldiers from his unit (61 Mechanized Infantry Brigade) who were killed during his time on the border. Yet he does not *focus* on memorializing the war, rather explicitly positioning his account as a therapeutic journey that flows from his self-diagnosis as suffering from PTSD. In the Preface to his memoir he writes:

I hope that this book can be not only a story of war, but also a story of triumph in overcoming the effects of these traumatic experiences[. . .]. Who knows, it may even help other veterans [. . .] to deal with these experiences in a positive manner and move forward with pride. (18)

In some ways, Holt’s narrative is as much about his suffering after the events of the Angolan conflict as it is about the actual experience of the War. He ascribes his suffering not only to the initial traumatic events of the conflict but also to the lack of treatment and support in the SADF at the time of his military service. He describes the years following his discharge from the army as a time crippled by his struggle with painful memories, explosive and unpredictable emotional reactions, and a debilitating sense of himself as a victim. The release only comes when he is able to identify his condition as PTSD, which he does making use of a manual published by the Australian Centre for War-Related Stress. “Once you are able to identify or understand the process, it becomes a lot easier to start dealing with the cause,” he declares, encouraging his readers and fellow veterans to follow his example:

By sharing some of this information, it is my sincere hope that other people may identify some of the behaviour patterns I experienced and seek either more information on the subject or professional help on how to deal with PTSD. I have no idea how many people are going through what I have been through, but I hope this book will inspire some of them to take action. Writing this book has not been without personal challenges, but it has been extremely therapeutic, so perhaps we will see a few more personal accounts of the Angolan War make their way into the public arena before long. (185)

Although Holt’s book places the most pronounced emphasis on PTSD of the memoirs under discussion, his account of the relationship between military service in the SADF and PTSD are echoed by two other memoirs that have

received less attention. Both support the argument about the role of PTSD as an explanatory schema in the narratives produced by English-speaking conscripts. Daniel Feinstein first qualified as a medical doctor at Wits before answering his call-up for national service in the early 1980s. He originally published an account of his experiences as a military doctor through a small Windhoek press in 1998 under the title *In Conflict*. However, when it was reissued by a South African publisher in 2011 (with minor editorial changes) it was re-titled *Battle Scarred: Hidden Costs of the Border War*. This name-change is highly significant because it suggests that the publishing environment in South Africa, thirteen years later, was conducive to re-packaging the experiences described in *In Conflict* as a trauma memoir with a title that explicitly references the “hidden” or invisible “scars” of trauma.

Another memoir, *Buried in the Sky* by Rick Andrew, at first seems to stand apart from trauma narratives such as Holt’s. Although an anti-heroic account of an ordinary conscript’s experiences, Rick Andrew’s narrative differs significantly from the conscript memoirs that followed Holt’s account. *Buried in the Sky* was written by a much older man who did his nine months of National Service in 1965, well before the beginning of the Border War in Namibia. His book describes his last three-month camp as a Citizen Force soldier based in an area of the border which was relatively incident-free. Andrew and his fellow “campers” spend their time smoking dagga, going on aimless patrols, and waiting for their border service to end. However, Andrew’s entire narrative is haunted by the figure of a traumatized soldier, in this case a friend of a comrade, who has broken down during his military training in South Africa. The man’s story is relayed through letters and second-hand information, yet his experiences are translated into the first person in Andrew’s narrative. This device gives the experience of PTSD a vivid immediacy that rises above the other events detailed in the account.

Not all the memoirs, which have followed Holt’s example into print, explicitly present the narrator as traumatized or function as trauma narratives, but they all feature the evocative figure of the traumatized soldier. In *Ops Medic: A National Serviceman’s Border War* (2008), Steven Webb writes from his experience of

being a medic based on the Namibian border in 1985. He experienced most of his time on the border as extreme boredom, and ended up volunteering to join infantry patrols through the bush in order to make his time pass more quickly. However, his narrative concludes with a significant meeting with a severely traumatized medic:

At first I didn't recognise him. He was also a combat medic but had [...] been seconded to the elite 32-Battalion [...]. His name was Murray something or other [...]. He was showing signs of post traumatic stress and obviously felt the need to talk to someone. (230)

Another conscript memoir, *Border-Line Insanity: A National Serviceman's Story* by Tim Ramsden, also presents a Ratel-crewman's time as an infantry soldier on the Namibian and Mozambique borders. As the title of his memoir suggests, this is also a time shot through with psychological break-down. He describes the effect of several months of Border service on his unit of National Servicemen:

This life was starting to wear us down – its punishing patrols, the overpowering elements of nature, the large doses of anxiety and fear, the loss of self-respect and dignity, together with an intense hatred of the country. To a lesser or greater degree, we were all bossies by then. It was just a matter of time before each reached breaking point. (159)

6. Trauma and Narrative

Any attempt to treat these memoirs of the Border War as trauma narratives needs to engage with the theorization of trauma that has dominated academic discussion since the early 1990s. This thinking treats trauma as a crisis of representation in which, to use the words of Cathy Caruth (one of the central figures behind the approach): “the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it” (91-92). Caruth traces the theoretical awareness of this disruption of temporality and, ultimately, history, to Freud's investigations into traumatic neurosis. She goes beyond Freud's formulation to conceptualize trauma as a metaphysics of emotional torment, which she finds exemplified in the Renaissance myth of Tancred (1-3). Tancred, in Tasso's retelling of the myth, is a crusader who unwittingly kills his lover, Clorinda, when

she is disguised as an enemy soldier. After her burial, he leads his army into an enchanted forest where his soldiers are stricken with terror. In an effort to break the power of the forest's spell, Tancred strikes out at a tree with his sword. In so doing he is tormented by the sight of blood pouring from the wound while he hears the sound of his beloved's voice crying out in pain.

For Freud, Tasso's tale was a potent example of the unconscious repetition of the traumatic event, which he identified as the defining symptom of 'traumatic neurosis;' but for Caruth the tale is also "a parable of psychoanalytic theory itself" or any attempt to engage with trauma through writing. This approach to trauma and writing is based on the model of *aporia*, or unresolvable paradox, derived from the Yale School of Deconstructive Critical Theory and Psychoanalysis (Luckhurst 4-10), and has tended to privilege a particular model of writing: "The impact of trauma can only be adequately represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms so that temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterized by repetition and indirection" (Whitehead 3).

Dominic LaCapra, a philosopher of history strongly influenced by psychoanalytic theory, has been a notable critic of the deconstructive approach to trauma. He points out that this approach "becomes questionable when it is routinized in a methodology or style that enacts compulsive repetition, including the compulsively repetitive turn to the *aporia*, paradox, or impasse" (LaCapra, "Trauma, Absence" 698). In LaCapra's view the privileging of *aporia* as a formal device is due to a conceptual confusion between the trauma of absence and the trauma of loss. Absence, which occurs in all societies and cultures, is the absence of the absolute. In contrast, "loss is situated on a historical level and is the consequence of particular events" ("Trauma, Absence" 702). This distinction is not made only for reasons of intellectual clarity but because the difference has important ethical and political dimensions. LaCapra accuses deconstructive criticism of letting itself be drawn into fetishising the "absence of an absolute" and in this way "downgrading the significance of particular historical losses" (702):

Post-apartheid South Africa and post-Nazi Germany face the problem of acknowledging and working through historical losses in ways that affect different groups differently. Indeed, the problem for beneficiaries of earlier oppression in both countries is how to recognize and mourn the losses of former victims and simultaneously to find a legitimate way to represent and mourn for their own losses. ("Trauma, Absence" 697)

La Capra goes on to make a useful distinction in his work between "writing trauma" and "writing about trauma." Elsewhere he has described the former as "[the] experimental, gripping and risky symbolic emulation of trauma" (*Writing History* 105), while the latter he understands as a form of writing in which the author, as subject, gains some degree of critical distance from the experience by imaginatively recollecting the traumatic events from the perspective of his or her present-day existence. The trauma narratives of the Border War veterans are closer in form to the latter genre: "writing about trauma." The authors of these memoirs all strive to achieve coherence and closure on their experience of war. As La Capra points out, this mode does not seek to emulate the experience of trauma but seeks to achieve distance:

When the past becomes accessible to recall in memory, and when language functions to provide some measure of conscious control, critical distance and perspective, one has begun the arduous process of working over and through the trauma in a fashion that may never bring full transcendence [. . .] but which may enable processes of judgement and at least limited liability and ethically responsible agency. (*Writing History* 90)

The feminist critic Kali Tal has also contested the deconstructionist fixation on the *aporia* of trauma writing. She has proposed a more political understanding of trauma narratives, characterizing them as a distinct variety of writing that she dubs the "literature of trauma." Deeply sceptical about the power of writing to communicate the intensity of the traumatic experience, Tal asserts that the writings of trauma survivors have their real significance within a community of fellow survivors. She acknowledges that the experience of trauma shatters the personal myths or conceptual schema of the victim, making the communication of the experience to those who have not undergone the trauma an impossible task; but she insists that this literature "is written from the need to tell and retell the story of the traumatic experience, to make it 'real' both to the victim and the

community” (21). The ‘community’ in her understanding is not a community of readers but those who have suffered the effects of similar traumas. This need to make an experience real is revealed by the Border War memoirists such as Holt, who writes about the relief that he feels in finding his story corroborated by other information appearing on the war in Angola: “It is a great relief to me that the truth [about the Angolan War] is becoming known – it is almost like having proof that all those things we did *really happened*” (his emphasis, 6). Holt also refers to a community of other veterans who, he hopes, will be able “to deal with these experiences in a positive manner and move forward with pride” (18) as a result of his narrative.

The emphasis on community is vitally important to Tal’s account and gives her analysis a political cogency which is absent from LaCapra’s rather lofty philosophical critique. Tal recognises that the narratives of trauma are inherently political: when the survivors of trauma attempt to articulate their experience it is a challenge to the system of myths and understandings in the broader culture. “Bearing witness is an aggressive act,” she insists. This means that “the battle over the meaning of a traumatic experience is fought in the arena of political discourse, popular culture, and scholarly debate. The outcome of this battle shapes the rhetoric of the dominant culture and influences future political action” (7).

Tal argues that the response by the broader culture is to codify the particularity of the trauma through the operations of “popular, political, and scholarly discourses,” eventually, as in the case of the US experience of Vietnam, producing a normative discourse, as in: “this is the story of Vietnam. If you were there you will recognise it; if you don’t recognise this story, you weren’t there” (Tal 11).

Even though the authors of the SADF conscript memoirs may not be explicitly engaging official discourses, their writing is a challenge to these. The memoirs of SADF conscripts who served in the Border War can be seen as engagements with a number of normative discourses: the authorised military discourses of military

strategy and heroism, and the hegemonic post-apartheid national discourse of complicity in an illegal race war.

6. The Trauma Narrative and Vietnam

Granger Korff's *19 with a Bullet* describes in vivid detail his exploits as a paratrooper in Angola in 1981. Korff reveals in his conclusion that he too has suffered the effects of post-traumatic stress in the years following his service and that the goal of his narrative is therapeutic. Korff finds himself experiencing the symptoms of PTSD after he is discharged from the army and has immigrated to the USA. He is haunted by his memories, suffers disabling flash-backs, and is unable to hold down a steady job or maintain a relationship. He is encouraged to visit a Veterans' Centre in the Los Angeles area and begins to tell his story. "For the first time I told a living soul of my anger, torment and my debilitating visions. The moment the words left my mouth and travelled to another human being's ear, I felt the spirit's grip weaken [. . .]. My terrible secret was out" (338). Diagnosed as suffering from PTSD, he begins to write down his experiences as part of the therapeutic programme at the Centre: "Invited and called back, the memories all came flooding in like chickens coming home to roost but this time I was ready for them and wrote them down on paper for all to see" (338). The result is his memoir, *19 with a Bullet*.

Holt was aware of the existence of PTSD from watching Vietnam War movies but "as far as I was concerned, it only affected the guys who had fought in Vietnam" (13). In common with Korff, Holt's use of the explanatory schema offered by PTSD is a result of the changing definitions of trauma that emerged in the United States following the end of the Vietnam War. The link to a distinctively post-Vietnam definition of trauma is perhaps made most explicitly in Korff's account because he participates directly in the "therapeutic outreach" which was institutionalized and funded by the US government through the Veterans' Administration, following a decade of political struggle by Vietnam veterans after the war. It was this struggle that established a national network of storefront

Veterans' Centres. These centres were one of the most concrete manifestations of the intense conflict over definitions, diagnosis, and treatment of war-induced trauma which developed in America in the decade following the Vietnam War.

Less accessible because it was self-published in Sweden by its joint authors, Peter Tucker and Marius van Niekerk, *Behind the Lines of the Mind: Healing the Mental Scars of War* is a whole-hearted engagement with PTSD closely modelled on the Vietnam-influenced model of therapy. Presented in the format of a self-help manual for SADF veterans, the Border War narrative (in this case an account of Van Niekerk's service as a Parabat from 1979-81) is largely background to the account of the therapeutic process. The authors declare that

PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) is the enemy within – a Claymore mine in the mind – exploding in slow motion before our very eyes, but largely unidentified by society, and therefore invisible, even to those who suffer most directly from its effects. (46)

During his exile in Sweden, the disturbed Van Niekerk met up with Tucker, a British artist engaged in therapy with immigrant children. Many of these children were the victims of war and conflict situations and Tucker encouraged Van Niekerk to see himself as traumatized in the same way, even though he had been a soldier. In addition, Van Niekerk tells that he “came across the expression PTSD through seeing documentaries on TV about the so-called ‘Vietnam syndrome’ in America” (18). Although not a psychologist, Tucker entered into an intense therapeutic relationship with Van Niekerk, diagnosing him as suffering from PTSD and encouraging him to write down his war experiences and document his dreams. The result of this process was that Van Niekerk came to feel that he was cured of his PTSD and was inspired to become an evangelist for the effectiveness of the PTSD diagnosis, claiming that “‘war trauma’ is still a largely unrecognized, cancerous growth in the heart of South African society that threatens to undermine every effort to solve the country's problems” (234).

8. A Genealogy of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

It is not surprising that these conscripts have turned to writing as a way of justifying their experiences, but it is striking that the form of writing, the trauma narrative, draws in a fundamental way on the post-Vietnam definition of trauma, as a post-traumatic syndrome (PTSD). To understand this distinctively post-Vietnam definition of trauma, it is necessary to trace the transformation in the meaning of trauma as a term which carries a particular association with the psychic consequences of war in the twentieth century. The original sense of trauma – as a traumatic injury to the body – first appears in English in the 17th century. However the word underwent a decisive shift in meaning in the late 19th century to include the psychological. Most commentators agree that this sense of trauma was a result of the new kind of injuries experienced by passengers caught up in railway accidents. Passengers showing no physical injuries frequently manifested striking psychological symptoms following severe railway accidents. These symptoms attracted the attention of two kinds of professional practitioner: doctors interested in hysteria and neurosis, and litigation lawyers. Litigation lawyers fought successfully to get these symptoms recognized by the courts as liabilities for the railway companies responsible for the accidents, while doctors, in their capacity as expert witnesses, argued over the cause of the debilitating symptoms which frequently manifested some time after the railway accidents. This delayed effect led to the insight that trauma was a disorder of memory, paradoxically responsible for both amnesia and for images (in the form of nightmares) that cannot be forgotten. It is also important to note that psychological trauma was from the time of its first emergence a contested term which occupied an unstable position within the medical and legal discourses of the time. As Allan Young summarizes:

The traumatic memory emerges at the end of the 19th Century at the intersection of two evolving fields of medical knowledge: knowledge of how trauma affects the nervous system [. . .] and knowledge of how pathogenic secrets impact upon the mental life of their owners. (n.pag.)

Armies have always been aware that violent warfare has emotional or psychological consequences. However throughout the nineteenth century these had variously been dealt with as disciplinary issues, designated as cowardice,

malinger or insanity: "Men were either sick, well, wounded or mad; anyone neither sick, wounded, nor mad but nonetheless unwilling to or incapable of fighting was necessarily a coward, to be shot if necessary" (Shepherd 25). But in the twentieth century the unprecedented severity and extent of psychological disorders amongst the conscripted soldiers in the First World War forced the military to pay specific attention to the emotional consequences of modern warfare. As the War progressed, the military authorities found themselves having to deal with enormous numbers of psychologically disabled soldiers. The diagnosis of "shell shock," developed early in the war by the British military psychologist Charles Meyers, was originally intended as a description of the consequences of direct physical damage to the nervous system by the percussive impact of exploding shells. The significance of this diagnosis was that it recognised the unprecedented violence of the industrialized destruction – primarily artillery fire – directed at the front lines of the conscript armies facing each other in their trenches; and it distinguished the condition from madness and cowardice. Nor were the British military alone in their struggles with this disturbing new condition. The Germans identified the condition as *Kriegsneurose* and the French as *la confusion mentale de la guerre* (Holden 19). The military, on all sides, were forced to turn to the new medical discipline of psychiatry in order to develop strategies for managing the epidemic of "shell shock" amongst their soldiers. However, as the War progressed, the symptoms of "shell shock" were found to be more widely spread than originally thought, and were also displayed by soldiers who had not been exposed to artillery fire, and sometimes even by soldiers who had yet to leave for the front lines! Most perplexing of all was the observation that soldiers who were physically injured by shelling or during combat did not manifest the symptoms of "shell shock." As a result "shell shock" was dropped as a diagnostic category by military psychiatry and was replaced by the diagnosis of "war neuroses." Although the diagnosis of "war neurosis," like "shell shock," distinguished the condition from insanity and cowardice, it had the effect of reducing or even removing the environmental factors of the battlefield and rather situated the aetiology of the condition in unconscious conflict, childhood factors, or hereditary flaws in the individual soldier. But regardless of aetiological theorizing, at the centre of the arguments over the phenomenon was

the military imperative to maintain the numbers of fighting men on the front line, to reduce “wastage” (Shepherd 41-110).

As early as December 1914, the British War Office began receiving “alarming reports” about the large numbers of both officers and men who had to be evacuated because of “nervous and mental shock” (Shepherd 21). Doctors and nurses in England, who had to deal with these casualties, were “dismayed and bewildered by the ‘titubating shell shockers,’ with their bizarre gaits and paralyses, stammers and tremors, nightmares and hallucinations, fits and shakings” (Shepherd 41). The psychological casualties continued to mount till, by the time of the Battle of the Somme in 1916, “shell shock and nervous disorders of war, hitherto a marginal medical problem became a major drain on manpower” (Shepherd 41). In this battle alone, it was estimated that up to 50% of casualty evacuations were for nervous disorders. Combined with the horrific toll of losses due to death and physical injury, it became clear to the military leadership that the psychological “wastage” had to be reduced.

The military psychiatrist – paradoxically responsible to the individual soldier as a doctor, yet serving a function within the military system – was ultimately tasked with returning as many of these soldiers as possible to the front line. From this often uneasy relationship emerged the strategy of Proximity, Immediacy and Expectancy (PIE), modelled on the process of “triage” used for the assessment of physical injuries at the front line by military doctors. In other words, soldiers exhibiting psychological damage were no longer sent back to England but were to be assessed and managed in the battlefield area. This became the standard technique for dealing with the phenomenon through most of the wars of the twentieth century, including, as we shall see, in the SADF during the Border War. PIE prioritizes the manpower demands of the military over the need for catering to the individual trauma sufferer by treating the traumatized soldier as close to the front line as possible (Proximity), as soon as the condition becomes noticeable (Immediacy), and with the expectation that the soldier will be returned to his unit if treatment is successful (Expectancy) (Shepherd 343). As a recognized diagnostic term, “shell shock” disappeared

before the end of World War 1 (although it continued to be used extensively in the media and the literature of the war), but the proliferation of related terms such as “war neurosis,” “nervous shock,” and “soldier’s heart” were symptomatic of on-going and inconclusive attempts to understand the aetiology of the phenomenon by military psychiatry.

As the term suggests, the diagnosis of “war neurosis” was strongly informed by the psycho-analytic model which dominated psychiatric thinking in the early decades of the twentieth century and that continued to dominate most psychiatric thinking into the next great conflict that broke out in 1939. As a result of this theoretical model the approach adopted by most forces during the Second World War focused on psychological testing in order to identify recruits who were likely to suffer break-down during combat (Shepherd 187-97). Unfortunately, this approach proved to be ineffective, with record levels of psychological disturbances manifesting in combat forces throughout the war. The American military learnt from this experience, and in the Korean War abandoned strict selection criteria for combat soldiers, and began to implement psychiatric units offering PIE-based interventions as part of their frontline medical system. These units were implemented even more extensively from the outset of the war in Vietnam in 1965. As a result, the percentage of psychiatric evacuations during the Vietnam War was significantly lower than the percentage in the Second World War. American military psychiatrists reported that the rate of psychiatric casualties had been reduced from an average of 30 per 1000 in Korea to 5 per 1000 in Vietnam (Scott 296). In fact one of the puzzles of the Vietnam War, from a psychiatric perspective, is how a war with such low rates of evacuation during the war itself could result in such a significant long-term psychic toll (Shepherd 340). The difference was that the most severe psychological consequences of the Vietnam War would manifest in veterans *after* the hostilities.

The manner in which these psychological consequences of the Vietnam War were given official recognition by the psychiatric establishment was through a struggle over the profession’s diagnostic categories. The first standardized

psychiatric diagnostic manual, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder (DSM), which appeared in the United States in 1952, registered a trace of the original diagnosis of “war neuroses” with a disorder labelled as “catastrophic stress reaction.” The emergence of such a manual based on statistical analyses of symptoms of mental disorders was indicative of a new empiricist hegemony in American psychiatry. This hegemony was based on the proven effectiveness of new psychotropic drug treatments for psychosis and depression and the decline of psycho-dynamic approaches to therapy. However, the inextricable relationship between the DSM definitions and the changing social environment became manifest with the publication of the second edition of the DSM in 1968, fourteen years later. The memory of war-induced psychological problems based on the experience of treating soldiers during the Second World War and the Korean War had faded, and the category of “catastrophic stress reaction” was dropped from the second edition of the DSM – although, as Gordon Turnbull points out, 1968 was the year that the conflict in Vietnam was reaching its peak (56).

Why a revised version of the “catastrophic stress reaction” appeared in the third edition of the DSM in 1980 as “post-traumatic stress disorder” is attributable to a number of complex factors; but, as I will argue, the most important was the politicization of the notion of trauma in the American psychiatric profession following the Vietnam War. The term trauma was introduced into the discourse around the war by a coalition of veterans and psychiatrists organized explicitly against the War. In contrast with the approach adopted by military psychiatrists towards “shell shock” and “war neuroses,” trauma was a term deployed by constituencies opposed to the war. The lead was taken by Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW), a loose grouping of veterans organized against the further prosecution of the Vietnam War, which was formed after a mass anti-war protest held in New York in 1967. The VVAW evolved from informal support mechanisms organized by groups of veterans themselves. Based on ‘rapping out’ their experiences and mental states to other veterans of the war, this technique of group consciousness-raising was explicitly derived from the examples of nascent feminist and gay political practice already in use at that time in

American politics. The VVAW was not merely a support group for veterans; it also pursued a radically anti-war agenda under the slogan of “Bring our brothers home.” It was their anti-war agenda that led them to emphasize the atrocities perpetrated by American forces in Vietnam through public hearings, dramatic re-enactments, and high profile events such as the “medal turn-in” ceremony held in Washington in 1971 and the “Winter Soldier Investigation” (Shepherd 360). The emphasis in these demonstrations, however, was not on the individual culpability of the perpetrators but on the war itself.²⁵ In the view of the VVAW, the Vietnam War was an atrocity and their political performances openly displayed wounded and disabled veterans as emblems of this suffering.

Radical psychiatrists such as Chaim Shatan and Robert J. Lifton, both prominent members of the anti-War Left, formed a “loose on-going association with the VVAW” (Scott 299) and began to publicise the psychological impact of the war on veterans through the term “post-Vietnam syndrome.” As we have seen, prior to this engagement, combat trauma had been dealt with as an internal military problem by military psychiatrists. Shatan and Lifton engaged with the issue as civilian psychiatrists concerned about the impact of the war on veterans who had returned to America. In Lifton’s words:

We professionals who were in the rap groups with the veterans did not see ourselves as serving a cooling function but rather as exploring with the veterans the roots of anger and rage. Of course we had plenty of anger of our own about the war, and we had our own struggles with redirecting and using the anger. (186)

Shatan and Lifton’s polemics were intended to direct public attention to the psychological consequences of the war for what they claimed were a significant percentage of veterans, men suffering from, in their view, notably higher levels of drug and alcohol addiction, homelessness and violent behaviour than the general population. As Shatan declared in an address to the American Orthopsychiatry Association in 1972:

²⁵ See the Proceedings of the Winter Soldier Investigation of 1971. Archived under *The Sixties Project*, Institute of Advanced Technology in the Humanities, University of Virginia at Charlottesville.

Any week's harvest of news contains its quota of hijackings, armed robberies, murders, and suicides involving Vietnam veterans – growing testimony that the official claim of few psychiatric casualties among these men is an artefact. (641)

These polemics were picked up and expanded upon by the popular media, particularly Hollywood, creating the figure of the crazed Vietnam veteran in films such as *Taxi Driver*, *The Deer Hunter* and *First Blood*. One of the myriad examples of this figure in American popular culture is captured in the lyrics of the Steely Dan song “Third World Man,” released in 1980:

Johnny's playroom
Is a bunker filled with sand
He's become a third world man
Smokey Sunday
He's been mobilized since dawn
Now he's crouching on the lawn
He's a third world man
[...]
I saw the fireworks
I believed that I was dreaming
Till the neighbours came out screaming
He's a third world man [...]. (*lyricsdepot.com* n.p.)

After the US withdrawal from Vietnam in 1973 and the end of direct American involvement in the War in 1975, the VVAW lost direction. The momentum of the anti-war movement was redirected by activist veterans and sympathetic psychiatric professionals towards getting official recognition for the consequences of the war through political pressure on the vast Veterans Administration, and by organizing within the psychiatric profession for a diagnostic category that specifically recognized the psychological effect of the war on veterans. The two campaigns were, of course, directly related, because the creation of a recognized diagnostic category was necessary in order to unlock financial compensation and medical treatment from the Veterans Administration.

Quite independent, but eventually to impact upon and reinforce the activist drive within post-Vietnam War politics and the American mental health profession,

was the legal movement to win compensation on behalf of the survivors of the Nazi Holocaust. So successful has been this movement that it is difficult to recall how little attention was given to the survivors of the Holocaust in the decades immediately after the Second World War. However, both the Holocaust survivors' movement and the Vietnam veterans' movement were driven to fight for a psychiatric category that could recognize the continuing effects of intense, life-threatening experiences and that would justify compensation claims and the provision of therapies for those affected (Luckhurst 63-64). The official result was the creation of the category of Post-Traumatic Stress in the third edition of the DSM, which appeared in 1980.

The four main diagnostic features of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, as laid down in the DSM III, were:

- i) The precipitating events for PTSD should be "outside the range of usual human experience" and "would evoke significant symptoms of distress in most people;"
- ii) The original trauma is re-experienced through "recurrent and intrusive" recollections of, dreams of, or acting out of the event;
- iii) "Numbing of responsiveness to or reduced involvement with the external world, beginning some time after the trauma;"
- iv) The diagnosis of PTSD was confirmed by the presence of further symptoms such as "hyper-alertness or exaggerated startle response; sleep disturbances; guilt about surviving when others have not, or about behaviour required for survival; memory impairment or trouble concentrating; avoidance of activities that arouse recollection of the traumatic event; [and] intensification of symptoms by exposure to events that symbolize or resemble the traumatic event."(DSM III 236-38)

Gordon Turnbull, a senior Royal Air Force psychiatrist who was to play an important role in getting the syndrome recognized by the British military, describes his excitement at the implications of the new PTSD classification:

“Although it didn’t say so explicitly, DSM III indicated that PTSD had nothing to do with the personality of the individual. PTSD could happen to anyone [. . .]” (55). The PTSD diagnosis expressly excluded the personality of the individual sufferer, but also bracketed off the culpability of the person affected. The original framers of the category were concerned to put the blame for the psychological consequences of the Vietnam War on American society and not on the individual soldier manifesting PTSD symptoms; representatives of Holocaust survivors and rape victims shared this determination not to blame the victim. As Wilbur Scott observes, the effect of the PTSD classification was to reclassify abnormal behaviour by soldiers in Vietnam as a normal response to the horrors of war. An epistemological shift had taken place, moving the focus of attention “from the particular details of the individual’s background and psyche to the nature of the war itself” (308).

8. The Category of Victim-Perpetrator

The unintended consequence of introducing PTSD as a psychiatric category that dissolved any moral or ethical approach towards the source of the trauma, was that the application of the category effectively ceased to discriminate between the victims and perpetrators of violence. This is clear from the very phrasing of the DSM III diagnostic criteria: “The trauma may be experienced alone (rape or assault) or in the company of groups of people (military combat)” (236). As Fred Turner points out, “in a telling bit of grammar and diction,” the wording of the criteria “suggested that what traumatized soldiers (and other trauma survivors) was simply being *in the presence* of certain events” (his emphasis, 62). The diagnosis allowed for the conflation of Holocaust survivors, the victims of sexual abuse, and veterans of the Vietnam War. In this way a distinction apparent in the political campaign during the war was lost, a campaign that sought to locate culpability for the war in American society or its politicians rather than among the soldiers who served in Vietnam – but without losing the notion of American soldiers as perpetrators. As Shatan puts it:

Atrocities perpetuated upon the Vietnamese while saving them from Communism are now almost as well known as those of Hitler’s

extermination camps. Less obvious, however, is that Vietnam veterans are themselves victims of atrocity as well as being former executioners. (640)

Although there was no sense that the veterans who testified in the “Winter Soldier Investigation” organized by the VVAW in 1971 were admitting individual culpability for their crimes, they were acknowledging that they had acted in ways that were criminal. Their crimes were presented publically as proof that the war was, in Lifton’s memorable phrase, “an atrocity-producing situation,” which he glossed as “an atmosphere of moral inversion, [in which] atrocity became the norm” (185). But while atrocious acts were nevertheless named as such, the new diagnostic paradigm could make things awkward for medical practitioners: in the words of Sarah Haley, one of the key psychology professionals behind the medicalization of the Vietnam experience as PTSD: “The Vietnam combat veteran who reports atrocities presents a particular therapeutic challenge” (196). The South African psychologist and activist, Gillian Eagle, writing from her own experience of working in the field of “violence intervention” in South Africa, is one of the many who have raised concerns about the medicalization of trauma. While she recognizes that the diagnosis “de-stigmatized traumatized individuals, who are no longer viewed as personally weak or psychically flawed” (83), she is deeply concerned that “PTSD employed as a defence can act in the interests of both victim and victimizers and herein lies the rub” (86).

This conflation is apparent in the conscript memoirs under examination in this chapter. Although there are very different types of culpability that can be identified in the narratives, all are subsumed under the category of PTSD. Holt, for instance, was a passive recipient of violence, but other soldiers such as Van Niekerk and Korff committed acts that were arguably war crimes. Korff, for instance, describes the killing of wounded PLAN soldiers on several occasions and goes into detail about his participation in the massacre of a clan of Bushmen/San people in Angola:

There were four or five kids ranging from five to ten years old. They were in a group, lying in the dust half naked and mangled by gunfire, their bodies caked with sand and blood. [. . .] In front of me and to my left, among the leaves, lay a Bushman woman [. . .]. In her other arm she still

clutched an infant holding him into her chest. The little tyke was naked and appeared unharmed but was dead from either shrapnel or terror [...]. It became clear to me that we had wiped out an entire Bushman clan [...]. They had tried to make a break for it when the base was hit by H Company and would have made it if Commandant Lindsay hadn't spotted them. They looked small and broken, like dolls. Some of their wrinkled, wizened-looking faces still showed the terror of being trapped like animals and slaughtered to the man. (236-37)

Likewise, Marius van Niekerk participated in several odious acts, notably the decapitation of a wounded Angolan soldier in 1980:

As I was cutting, he started to make these horrible noises ... he began to shake all over, and blood was pouring out of the wound ... and ... he just didn't want to die. I don't know what came over me ... I panicked ... just cutting and cutting and cutting like crazy ... and thinking: die, just die; please die now. (Tucker and van Niekerk 225; his ellipses)

In the statement quoted above, Gillian Eagle was reflecting on the experience of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa which, as many commentators have observed, brought the notion of trauma and the diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder to the centre stage of political discourse in South Africa.

10. Trauma at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission

Although the founding act makes no explicit mention of trauma, the public hearings of the TRC were organized around the concept (Colvin 153). Psychology professionals were strongly represented amongst the Commissioners and trauma counselling was instituted at all levels of the proceedings.

Significantly PTSD was specifically linked to the experience of conscription in one in a series of special TRC hearings. Gary Koen, a psychotherapist who had treated an Ops Medic he had diagnosed with PTSD, sounded a warning to other practitioners planning to work with traumatized ex-combatants, telling them that "you can expect to encounter horrors on a scale not thought possible" (TRC Conscription Hearings Part 3 n.pag.). More horrors were presented to the hearing by John Deegan, despite the fact that he was not a conscript (he was a

professional police officer) and had already delivered 27 pages of confession to an amnesty hearing a year previously. Deegan held the rapt attention of the hearing with his retelling of atrocities that he had participated in as a member of Koevoet in northern Namibia. After this he was thanked by the chair for giving them “the opportunity to get a glimpse of some of these unspeakable activities there” (TRC Conscription Hearings Part 3 n.pag.). Deegan also revealed that he had identified eight PTSD symptoms in himself and declared his wish to return to Namibia for a therapeutic tour, “with the support of the TRC and with a psychologist in attendance” (TRC Conscription Hearings Part 3 n.pag.).

I argue that the ethical loophole for the individual sufferer of war, whether victim or perpetrator of violence, which is created by PTSD diagnosis, in some ways legitimizes the memoirs of SADF soldiers who had previously felt silenced. The diagnostic category of PTSD offers an explanatory framework which effectively ‘allows’ these conscripts to present themselves as victims of the Border War.

Although the TRC was largely avoided and ignored by ex-SADF conscripts, the sessions of the TRC were so extensively reported in the South African media that the notion of trauma permeated the white South African consciousness. This was exemplified by an episode of the popular actuality television programme, *Carte Blanche*, broadcast on the subscription television service MNet in June 2001. Entitled “The War Within” the episode was prompted by the publication of Rick Andrew’s conscript memoir, *Buried in the Sky*, which appeared in that same year. According to the show’s Executive Producer, Georges Mazarakis, *Carte Blanche* had dealt with the TRC but “we thought the story of SADF veterans hadn’t been told” (personal interview 2013). As we have seen, Andrew’s account was somewhat anomalous in that he never saw any active service, and the traumatized figure in his narrative is a conscript who breaks down during military training in South Africa, not in combat. However the thirty-minute *Carte Blanche* report conflated several different kinds of experience under the PTSD diagnosis.

The programme is important, not only because it is the most probable source of the PTSD self-diagnosis amongst many ex-SADF conscripts, but because it demonstrated the conflation of personal culpability with the explanatory framework of the medical condition. The programme featured interviews with Rick Andrew, an ex-Parabat called Mark Coetzee, and the ex-Koevoet operative who had previously testified to the TRC Special Hearing on Conscription, John Deegan. Rather to his surprise, because he admitted “I was never in that much direct action. I don’t wake up with the fear of being shelled or anything,” Rick Andrew was presented as a PTSD sufferer, as were Deegan and Coetzee. Deegan happily retold the atrocity stories which had so beguiled the Special Hearing of the TRC and confessed that he was a murderer. Nevertheless, the programme presenter breezily conflated the three different orders of experience (and culpability) claiming: “Three veterans with three different experiences of war. But a common denominator John, Mark and Rick share with each other and thousands of other veterans is the trauma they carry with them.”

The programme had a powerful impact on the MNet audience in South Africa. The Carte Blanche server reportedly “collapsed under the wave of emails that poured in from veterans all over the country” (Tucker 83). One of the viewers was the newly appointed Surgeon-General of the South African National Defence Force, Lieut. General Rinus Jansen van Rensburg, who ordered an official investigation of the condition by the Military Health Service and steps to assist veterans suffering from PTSD. A rather unrealistic offer of free psychological counselling for any veterans suffering from PTSD was made, but this evaporated in the face of budgetary and staffing realities. As Tucker concludes: “Lack of adequate resources and a change of leadership in the SAMHS put paid to these ambitious plans. They were, quite simply, too good to be true” (84).

11. Psychology/Psychiatry in the SADF

The adoption of PTSD as a means of dealing with Bush War neurosis also needs to be understood in the context of how “trauma” and psychiatric treatment for trauma were handled within the SADF during the Bush War. No in-depth study

has yet been written on the role of psychology in the SADF, but the anecdotal evidence is that trauma was given minimal recognition by the military authorities at the time. Mental health professionals had an ambivalent status in the army at the best of times, as indicated by the army slang of *kopkrimpers* (Head Shrinkers) or *kopsmokkelaars* (Head Smugglers) (Fowler, *Grensvegter* 51). The low regard for mental health professionals in the Army is borne out by Antony Feinstein in his memoir *In Conflict/Battle Scarred*, where he tells how he was conscripted into the war effort after getting a regular medical degree from the University of the Witwatersrand. After completing his basic military training, he is assigned to a medical specialization. His choice is Plastic Surgery, but he finds, to his dismay, that he has been appointed as a psychiatrist. The manner of his allocation is a grim indication of the status of psychiatrists in the SADF:

There must be a mistake, I think, but it turns out there is not. Plastic surgery has a couple of slots only and they are filled in no time. So, what comes next?

‘Psychiatry of course, stupid.’ This is explained to me by a very pock-marked, extremely irritable sergeant. ‘Shit,’ he yells, ‘don’t you know your alphabet? PS comes after PL. Now fuck off.’

The army decides that I am to be a psychiatrist. There’s nothing I can do about it. (17)

After six months working in the mental wards at 1 Military Hospital in Pretoria, where he deals mainly with floridly psychotic patients, he is sent to Oshakati, “the largest military base in the war zone,” where he is expected “to run a psychiatric triage service [. . .] and screen the troops for post-traumatic stress disorder” (42). In actual fact, he spends most of his time dealing with the alcoholism of the Permanent Force staff at the base. The triage service he is expected to apply is based on the PIE principles of proximity, immediacy, and expectancy. As we have seen, this approach was first formulated during the First World War and represented a psychiatry “serving the manpower needs of the military” (Dean 44) rather than any concern with the long term consequences of combat stress for the individual soldier. As one ex-SADF psychologist who struggled with the implications of following the PIE principles put it:

There is a double standard [. . .]. The psychologist is part of the system, is supporting the system, is congruent with the system. [. . .] you can help practice psychotherapy technically, but can you practice it ethically and morally? You've got to twist something; you've got to distort the situation in order to get psychology to work. [. . .] You've got to betray someone or something to keep doing the job. ("André," in Fowler, *Pro Patria* 108)

Barry Fowler, who served as a professional psychologist with the rank of Captain in the South African Medical Services, describes how he was posted to Sector 10 on the Border for three months in 1987. The entire military Sector 10, which was the largest section of the combat region spanning most of Ovamboland, was serviced by two military psychologists. Fowler, in his report on his border duty, summarized the psychologists' duties as follows:

Psychological Services, Sector 10, offer a comprehensive psychological service to soldiers (national servicemen and permanent force members) and police serving in Sector 10, the wives and children of the permanent force members, and to the local white civilian population. Services are also offered to the units in Sector 10, with regard to assessment of members showing behavioural problems, psychopathology, or substance abuse disorders, and making recommendations regarding their management or therapy and offering such therapy. (55)

Like Feinstein, he found that most of his time was taken up dealing with the marital problems of the permanent force staff based at Oshakati. It seems that as part of the service, the two psychologists, on their own initiative, also delivered lectures at various bases on the symptoms of PTSD but received little support from the army officers or even recognition from the troops. In many cases, the base commanders were not interested in psychological services: "preferring to deal with 'psychological' problems with 'Kaffirsielkunde' ('Bush' psychology)²⁶, which usually involved treating problems as disciplinary offences" (Fowler, *Grensvegter* 78). By the late 1980s, the SADF seemed to have developed protocols for "psychological debriefing," but the implementation of these procedures was not particularly thorough. Clive Holt, one of the few memoirists to describe being on the receiving end of these services, is dismissive of the

²⁶ The use of the racist term 'kaffir' suggests that the treatment is based on coercive punishment of some sort.

effectiveness of the debriefing (or “*ontlonting*”) he experienced after his devastating experiences in Angola:

Special tents had been set up for the debriefing sessions, and we were told to report to them as a group, not individually [. . .]. We went into the tent and sat on a small benches arranged around the perimeter in a U-shape. It was about 10h30, and I remember the psychologist saying something about having to be somewhere by 11h00, so the chances of anything meaningful happening were pretty minimal to begin with [. . .] the session was over in about 25 minutes and I felt that I had not even begun to get in touch with the emotional and traumatic impact of what I had been through. (121)

12. Conclusion

The reality of conditions in the SADF is that mental distress was generally not recognized by the military, hence the mocking attribution of the terms ‘*bossies*’ or ‘*bosbefok*’ to any soldiers who exhibited signs of mental breakdown. In the absence of any compassionate psychiatric discourse around the Bush War, it was PTSD, received through and filtered by American culture, which became the only discourse available for conscripts who needed to articulate their experience of the war²⁷, and through their narratives distance themselves from the ethical implications of their involvement. Baines recognizes that the media representations of Vietnam provided a basis for English-speaking conscripts to frame the narration of their experiences; however I argue in this chapter that while Vietnam representations are found to a greater or lesser degree in all the memoirs under discussion, it is the self-diagnosis of PTSD which plays the most significant role in these accounts. The reason why PTSD provided such an attractive framework of understanding was that it offered – albeit unconsciously – an ethical opportunity for the conscripts who produced it. As Tucker and Van Niekerk assert:

²⁷ Catherine Merridale’s research into the memories of the ‘Great War’ amongst Soviet Veterans suggests that these do not necessarily have to be inscribed through the concept of trauma: ‘In view of the near-total acceptance of PTSD as a diagnostic reality, a universal human issue, the Soviet attitude to trauma, at least as the survivors and their carers communicated it to me, came as a surprise’ (380).

In regard to the white community in South Africa, focusing the spotlight on PTSD will help in removing the burden of collective guilt that still lies hidden under the skins of every white South African who lived through those years. Ex SADF soldiers are the survivors and victims of what is now recognized by most people to have been a morally reprehensible war. (48)

If, as the journalist Eve Fairbanks suggests, writing about the Bush War is about creating an identity, then these first-person memoirs create an identity that is 'inscribed' through the experience of trauma, more precisely, the post-Vietnam war medicalization of trauma as the 'disorder' of PTSD. It is through the diagnosis of PTSD that these veterans seek to distance themselves from the ethical implications of their involvement as conscripts in the conflict. But as LaCapra reminds us, "with respect to historical trauma and its representation, the distinction among victims, perpetrators, and bystanders is crucial. 'Victim' is not a psychological category. It is in variable ways, a social, political, and ethical category" (723).

Kali Tal also warns against conflating the trauma of pure victims with that of soldiers. But she reminds us of the reason why trauma at the individual level is so devastating – because it disrupts the personal myths which enable individuals to function in the world. The traumatized conscripts have carried their physical wounds into the new South Africa. As we have seen, their experience of the war was silenced under the previous military regime and has been marginalized by the discourses of the new South Africa. Tal rightly insists that all trauma writing is an intervention in prevailing discourse and therefore a political act; but the danger of collapsing the victim-perpetrator categorization into victims (as in 'we are all victims of the war') is that it tends to erode the element of agency. These authors, by not being prepared to understand the war, or by sidelining the political background to their roles, are evading their own political and ideological complicity, if not agency.

CHAPTER 3 TRAUMA AND PHOTOGRAPHY

1. Introduction

Understanding the restricted visual legacy of South Africa's Border War and what this means for the memory of the war in the present will entail a critical exploration of the debates over the ethical implications of photography and the role that photographs play in the memory of traumatic events such as warfare. These theoretical debates and their implications for the project will be discussed in this chapter.

Anglophone photographic theory has been dominated by the views of Susan Sontag and (in translation) Roland Barthes. As will be argued in this chapter, both Sontag and Barthes have moved from their most influential positions of hostility towards photography on moral and political grounds to an acceptance of photography's referential power. I will then examine two contemporary positions on photography, articulated by the Israeli scholar Ariella Azoulay and the American media analyst Susan Linfield. In Azoulay's work, one finds a sophisticated model of the complexity of photographs and a proposal for reading photographs in a way that resonates powerfully with my own artistic practice in the BOS exhibition project. At the same time, I am persuaded by Linfield's emphasis on the importance of the moral implications of displaying or viewing photographs of suffering and atrocity.

2. The Missing Images in Sontag and Barthes

It is striking that both Sontag's and Barthes' texts have significant absences. *On Photography* doesn't have a single image to challenge the authority of Sontag's text. *Camera Lucida* is seemingly more accommodating since it contains

reproductions of most of the photographs that Barthes discusses in his text. But the photograph that is at the heart of the book and that is most important for his phenomenological account of photography, the so-called *Winter Garden* photograph, is deliberately excluded from the text.²⁸

The ostracizing of photographs from these texts reflects the deep suspicion that academic theory has harboured towards photography throughout most of the twentieth century. Perhaps the most influential statement of this position is articulated by Sontag in *On Photography*, the collection of essays which appeared in book form in 1977.²⁹ Hailed by John Berger as “[t]he most original and important work yet written on the subject,”³⁰ it became, according to Neal Ascherson, “almost instantly a bible [. . .]. Its readers not just the university young [. . . but also] the men and women at the sharp end – those you find edging up bullet-scarred streets with Nikons dangling around their flak jackets”(n.pag.) To this day, there seems barely a photography reading list which does not feature the book.³¹

The opening essay, entitled “In Plato’s Cave,” positions Sontag’s critique within a tradition of hostility towards the dissembling power of the image. The suspicion of appearances can, as her essay title implies, be traced back to Plato; but rather than expressing a general hostility towards the image, Sontag’s polemic is very specifically directed against the malign effects of the photographic image. Sontag was writing against the complacently positive view of photography which had come to dominate American popular opinion in the first half the century, like this expressed by Walter Lippmann in 1922:

²⁸ Strictly speaking, the *Winter Garden* photograph is not the only image mentioned in the text which is not included, but it is the only significant image excluded.

²⁹ The chapters in *On Photography* originally appeared as essays in *The New York Review of Books* between 1971 and 1974.

³⁰ Berger’s quote appeared as a blurb on the cover of the Penguin edition of the book.

³¹ A typical example of such a reading list is the entry for *On Photography* in “A Photographer’s Reading List: Critical Theory.” The annotation on Sontag’s text describes the book as “[a] brilliant collection of essays on photography, its meaning, purpose and use in the modern world” (Miles n.p.).

Photographs have the kind of authority over imagination today, which the printed word had yesterday, and the spoken word before that. They seem utterly real. They come, we imagine, directly to us, without human meddling, and they are the most effortless food for the mind conceivable [. . .]. The whole process of observing, describing, repeating, and then imagining has been accomplished. (qtd. in Zelizer 9)

Sontag presents a counterview that is fundamentally hostile to this valuation of photography and contemptuous of its effects. "There is an aggression implicit in the very use of the camera" (7), she asserts. To take a photograph is "a way of refusing experience" (9) or is "a defence against anxiety, and a tool of power" (8). Photographs, in her view, dull the perceptions of the viewers, while the actual act of taking a photograph is described in terms that equate it with atrocities such as rape or even a "soft murder," an act she describes as "appropriate to a sad, frightened time" (15).

Worst of all, according to Sontag, the political effects of photography are deemed negligible or, paradoxically, even negative. Photographs, in her view, are superficial fragments of surface reality that cannot reveal deeper political analysis or truths: "the camera's rendering of reality", she tells us, "must always hide more than it discloses" (23). Photographs, in her view, can never create knowledge outside of an existing climate of opinion, implying that the photograph cannot ever be an independent source of meaning.

Coupled with this diagnosis, the additional negative effect of photographs in the modern world, according to her analysis, is that they are numbing: "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. [. . .] Images transfix. Images anesthetize. (20)

Through the sheer proliferation of images, particularly shocking images of atrocity and horror, the public becomes inured to the human significance of the suffering portrayed. As the only solution to this situation, where photographs are swallowing up the real, Sontag calls for an "ecology of images" (180). This

ecology is necessary because we have “de-Platonized our understanding of reality” (179).

Sontag’s text is not however a coherent theoretical study. Rudolf Arnheim, one of the book’s early critics, discerned the lack of any rigorous argument underlying *On Photography*:

To adumbrate concepts by accumulating all the bits of evidence is a stimulating but ultimately unsatisfying procedure. The problems are laundered by a churning rotation which turns up the same aspects again and again and leaves relations and contradictions unexplored. (514)

Also far from being original, most of the striking ideas in *On Photography* are largely unattributed restatements of ideas that were first expressed by left-wing critics of the Weimer media culture in the 1930s, notably Walter Benjamin, without the subtlety of their dialectical analysis.

So how, if *On Photography* lacks a coherent argument, do we account for the influence of Sontag’s text? Sontag’s assertions, all conveyed in her epigrammatic style, captured the suspicion that the intellectual elite held towards a popular visual culture founded in the proliferation of photographs. But most remarkable is that this powerful expression of disenchantment and suspicion towards all photography appeared in 1977, immediately after the Vietnam war, a conflict whose outcome was profoundly influenced by the impact of photographic images.

Sontag’s negative view of photographs was shared by Roland Barthes in his early, also highly influential critical work, *Mythologies*. If Sontag sketched out an attitude towards photography, Barthes provided a critical methodology. Barthes used semiotics, an application of linguistic theory, to decode the ideological messages in culture. In *Mythologies* he showed that photographs were the exemplary form of ideological transmission, what he called “mythological speech,” because they naturalized their ideological meanings through the apparent transparency of the image. Using as his example “a young Negro in a

French uniform” saluting the French flag (116), which he found on the cover of a copy of *Paris-Match*, he showed how the image was drained of its particular significance and filled with ideological meanings.

Translated into English in 1972, Barthes’s *Mythologies* launched the field of cultural studies, sparking countless analyses that showed how photographs in the media were just a particular instance of ideologically loaded linguistic systems. Meanwhile other scholars, such as John Tagg, Alan Sekula and Abigail Solomon-Godeau, used French poststructuralist theory to argue that, in Tagg’s words, “the indexical nature of the photograph – the causative link between the pre-photographic referent and the sign – can guarantee nothing at the level of meaning” (3). From this political perspective, the photograph was seen as simply a function of new regimes of power and surveillance that intensified after World War II.

One of the reasons why *Camera Lucida* has been such a provocative text is that in this work Barthes decisively distanced himself from his earlier approach. Colin MacCabe, by his own admission a devoted disciple of Barthes’s earlier work, expresses his dismay on discovering that *Camera Lucida* was “in direct contradiction with the major theses and themes of [Barthes’s] earlier work.” MacCabe goes on to observe that:

More surprisingly, he simply ignores arguments that refuse the photograph any privileged relation to the referent and instead analyze it within systems of connotation and signification that provide it with its meaning. The surprise stems from the fact that Barthes himself most tellingly articulated such arguments from *Mythologies* onward. (73)

In *Camera Lucida* Barthes is dismissive of his earlier semiotic approach towards photographs and does provide an argument for the meaning of photographs as memory objects – but this comes at a price. Although Barthes realizes that the subject of a photograph is “the necessarily real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph,” the consequence of his approach in *Camera Lucida* is to limit the significance of photographs to an entirely personal dimension. This is the drama of Barthes’s own encounter with

the *Winter Garden* photograph: an encounter which is at the heart of his attempt to discover in *Camera Lucida* what photographs are in themselves. The *Winter Garden* photograph is an image that a grief-stricken Barthes comes across amongst his late mother's possessions after her death. Barthes, who had lived with his mother, is desperately looking for an image in which he can, as he puts it, recognize "the truth of the face I had loved" (67). He sorts through a number of images that fail to speak to him but then finds this photograph:

The photograph was very old. The corners were blunted from having been pasted into an album, the sepia print had faded, and the picture just managed to show two children standing together at the end of a little wooden bridge in a glassed-in conservatory, what was called a Winter Garden in those days. My mother was five at the time (1898), her brother seven. (67)

In looking at the photograph, Barthes experiences the intense pricking or puncturing of the viewer's sensibility that he calls the *punctum*, the highly individual response to a photograph which he opposes to the blandly conventional reading of a photograph for sociological or historical or political information, which he designates as the *studium*.

(I cannot reproduce the Winter Garden Photograph. It exists only for me. For you [the reader], it would be nothing but an indifferent picture, one of the thousand manifestations of the 'ordinary' [...] at most it would interest your *studium*: period, clothes, photogeny; but in it, for you, no wound.) (73)

This is why the photograph is not reproduced in *Camera Lucida*. The picture could not mean the same to readers other than Barthes. It would be a trivial example of an antiquated snapshot. The photograph could not wound, as it pricks a viewer with a personal relationship to the subject matter. There is a paradox here that supports my contention that the distrust of photography is typical of literary experts, notably Barthes and Sontag, who have dominated the Anglophone critical discussion. In this telling example, Barthes does not believe that his readers would be able to share his experience of the *Winter Garden* photograph; yet he nevertheless relies on words to describe the effect it had on him.

We have to ask what caused this radical rethinking of the significance of the photograph for Barthes? In some ways he had been distancing himself from a rigorous semiotics throughout the 1970s. But the change of position that he attempts to articulate in *Camera Lucida* was surely due to his direct experience of real trauma, the death of his beloved mother, Henriette Barthes, who had died in 1977. Unlike the public images that he interrogated with a political semiotics in his work of the 1960s, Barthes, I think very bravely, puts this method to the test and finds it wanting in the case of images related to intense personal trauma.

There is also no doubt that the direct experience of warfare and trauma caused Sontag, in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, her second major statement on photography, to modify her earlier position. Sontag experienced, at first hand, the brutality of the civil war in the Balkans when she went to Sarajevo in 1993, to direct a production of Becket's *Waiting for Godot* with a group of local actors in the besieged city.³² In the months that she spent in that tragic city, amongst Bosnians living through the terrible events of the siege, she learnt to appreciate the significance of photographs to the victims of political violence.

Perhaps the verb 'modify' expresses this shift too emphatically. In Eliot Weinberger's words, *Regarding the Pain of Others* is "an elaboration, partial repetition and partial refutation of her earlier book" (n.p.). As a theoretical study, the latter book is more rigorous in its attention to the ontology of the photographic image. She now recognizes that, "when it comes to remembering," the static image has a "deeper bite" (22) than the flow of images on the television screen: "Memory freeze-frames; its basic unit is the single image. In an era of information overload, the photograph provides a quick way of apprehending something and a compact form for memorizing it" (22). Most of all she distances herself decisively from her earlier claim that the proliferation of violent images in contemporary culture makes people less responsive. She mocks her earlier call for an "ecology of images" and recognizes that this view is related to the

³² See Sontag's own account of the experience in her 1993 essay, "Godot Comes to Sarajevo."

complacent belief, “something of a French specialty,” that reality is now purely a spectacle produced by the media:

To speak of reality becoming a spectacle is a breath-taking provincialism. It universalizes the viewing habits of a small, educated population living in the rich part of the world [. . .]. It suggests, perversely, unseriously, that there is no real suffering in the world. (110)

Perhaps most importantly, she recognizes that against the background of increasing horrors in the twentieth century, the photograph has gained authority over the written word. She situates trauma photography within a history of war photography from the Crimea to the first Gulf War, and shows that such photography has a rich and varied history that has often, most notably in the photography of the Vietnam war, been at odds with the view of the military prosecuting the war. The recognition that images of an event are necessary in order to make it real (which was a relatively undeveloped aside in *On Photography*) is given great stress in *Regarding the Pain of Others*. Sontag recognizes the inherent tendency of the camera to both objectify and beautify its subject matter, but presents a far more sophisticated understanding of how photographs work within the practices of contemporary media.

Although *Regarding the Pain of Others* is a more considered and systematic meditation on photography than *On Photography*, it still suffers from, as Michael Fried observes, “its lack of a vectored argument, a typical feature of Sontag’s writing” (32). This is why her concluding pages need to be given attention. The book ends with a meditation on the constructed photograph by Jeff Wall entitled *Dead Troops Talk (A Vision After an Ambush of a Red Army Patrol near Moqor, Afghanistan, Winter 1986)*. In the Canadian artist’s characteristic style the photograph is presented as a vast light box (approximately 22 metres by 41 metres) of near billboard dimensions. The brilliantly illuminated screen shows a dramatic tableau in which actors, directed by Wall, pose as the dead Russian soldiers suddenly brought back to life after a fatal ambush during the Russian war in Afghanistan. The context in which Sontag considers the work is a rhetorical question she poses for herself and for her readers: whether it is

possible that an image (or group of images) could mobilize someone to oppose war. Wall's photograph (it is actually a digital composite of numerous photographs) is described by Sontag as "exemplary in its thoughtfulness and power" and, tellingly, as "the antithesis of a document" (123). The picture, making erudite references to the tradition of history painting and the spectacular visualizations of warfare that were popular in the nineteenth century, such as *tableaux vivants* and dioramas, shows the dead Russian soldiers fooling around with each other, as oblivious to the Afghans who can be seen looting their possessions as they are to the gaze of the viewers looking up at them in Wall's massive image. To Sontag, the dead Russians are telling us, that is, "everyone who has never experienced anything like what they went through" that: "We don't get it. We truly can't imagine what it was like. We can't imagine how dreadful, how terrifying war is; and how normal it becomes. Can't understand, can't imagine. [. . .] And they are right" (125-26). It is a remarkable turn-around. After her recognition that photography can represent pain and trauma without numbing the observer, she nevertheless interprets Wall's art photograph as confirming that ultimately the extremes of experience in warfare cannot be communicated visually. Although photographs of war and trauma are politically and morally necessary they cannot communicate the subjective essence of such experiences.

One can be cynical about Sontag's celebrity engagement with other people's suffering, but it is striking and important how the meditation on her experiences in Bosnia has led her to a more nuanced engagement with the intimate relationship between modern warfare and photography. However, her conclusion suggests that she remains skeptical about the power of photographs to convey the subjective experience of warfare. The question here is whether this skepticism is peculiar to photography. "We can't imagine how dreadful, how terrifying war is; and how normal it becomes," she insists. Barthes, for his part, has provided a powerfully revisionist account of photographic effect, but at the price of limiting the emotional impact to the extremely personal. We need to go beyond these analyses to a more thorough account of the significance of photographs in situations of intense social trauma, violence and death.

3. Imaging the Holocaust

In some ways' Sontag's expressed hostility to photographic images has been taken even further in the debates around photographic images of the Holocaust. Most famously the documentary film-maker Claude Lanzmann has insisted that "[t]here are no images of the Shoah."³³ In other words: that photographic evidence cannot be used because it distorts the memory of the cataclysmic event. Lanzmann, who restricted himself to oral testimonies for his nine-hour documentary on the Shoah, has even gone on record to say that he

There is not one second of archival material in *Shoah* because it is not the way I work or think, and besides it does not exist. [. . .] If I had found an existing film – a secret film because that was forbidden – shot by an SS and showing how 3000 Jews, men, women and children, were dying together, asphyxiated in the gas chamber of Krema 2 in Auschwitz, not only would I not have shown it, but I would have destroyed it. (Lanzmann in *Le Monde*, March 3, 1994. Qtd. in Serge Thion, n.p.)

Lanzmann and other critics who take this position are referring to the fact that the vast majority of photographs of the Holocaust were taken either by the Nazi perpetrators or by the allies after the liberation of the camps in 1945. Those opposed to the public display of these photographs argue that looking at such images replicates the original act of violence against the victims. The viewer of such photographs is placed structurally in the same position as the violent oppressor and is voyeuristically replicating the experience of oppression and repeating the victimhood of the photograph's subjects in the act of looking.

These issues around the photographic representation of the Holocaust came to a head with an exhibition in Paris in 2001 that included the only four photographs known to exist of the actual gas chambers in operation. To add to the complexity

³³ Lanzmann has variously expressed this view, most recently in an interview with *The Guardian* of Thursday 9 June 2011, where he talks about his invitation to visit Iran to show his epic documentary on the Holocaust, *Shoah* (Jeffries n.p.). His Iranian audience were reportedly disappointed to discover that his film didn't show any images of the corpses.

of the case, these were also a rare example of photographs taken by the inmates themselves. The photographs, snatched under conditions of extreme danger by members of the despised *Sonderkommando*, the camp inmates who operated the gas chambers and crematoria in return for increased food rations and a few extra weeks of life, were smuggled out of Auschwitz, and later retrieved by the Polish Resistance. The appearance of these images, fifty years later, in the Paris exhibition provoked a storm of violent polemic about the ethics of displaying such photographs.

The curator, Georges Didi-Huberman, was accused of a voyeuristic “*jouissance* in horror” and a grotesque sadism. “Unless one exults in horror, there is reason enough not to see the exhibition,” it was claimed by French reviewers. More broadly, it was asserted that the display of the pictures could be associated with a form of aestheticized commodification of the Holocaust. “Auschwitz, a photogenic object?” queried one critic. Further, he was guilty, his accusers said, of a “religious fetishization” of the pictures, an “elevation of the image to the status of relic.” Didi-Huberman’s response to such criticisms was to insist on a nuanced, dialectical conception of the images, so that – far from reading the photographs solely as unmediated truth, fetish object or commodification of history – they are better understood as “able to produce an effect *along with* its negation [his emphasis]. They are, in turn, fetish and fact, vehicle of beauty and site of the unbearable, consolation and the inconsolable. They are neither pure illusion nor all of the truth” (80).

4. Other ways of looking

Didi-Huberman’s recognition that photographs are complex and difficult images – that they are both fetish and fact – is an important revision of Sontag’s and Barthes’s views on photography. This view has been developed by the Israeli scholar Ariella Azoulay. Of particular significance for my argument is that Azoulay is also concerned with the absence of certain kinds of images. In her recent study entitled *The Civil Contract of Photography* she comments on the absence of photographs of rape or sexual assault. This concerns her, because on her feminist reading of the struggle to define rape as a crime of violence as

distinct from a sexual encounter, she is surprised by the continuing exclusion of any images. By excluding such photographs – of the act, the consequences, or the victim – she argues that the victims of sexual violence are excluded from the “civil contract” which came into being with the invention of the camera:

The ability to create a common community around shared images isn't required to create the ultimate repository of rape images or only distinctive images of rape. Neither are these shared images meant only as an injunction to remember and not to forget, as the cultural function of photographs is sometimes understood. The photographs are part of the tools that enable us to rehabilitate the *sensus communis* and construct around it a common community of negotiation, in the framework of which we are able to agree on the boundaries of disagreement. When rape images lie outside the sphere of discussion, are removed from it suddenly or in an incisive fashion, we are completely unable to manufacture the boundaries of our agreement or disagreement in regard to them, and we are prevented from negotiating over turning at least some of them into emergency claims. (261)

The real importance of Azoulay's analysis is that she has introduced a theoretical understanding of the complexity of the photograph as object. On the one hand, she shifts the focus from a dualist concern with the photograph and the viewer to a more complex tripartite analysis of the subject, photographer, and viewer. This is very important indeed. The structure is made clear in the rest of her study, which is not about absent images, but is about the role that existing photographic images play in the Palestinian resistance to the Israeli occupation of the West Bank. On the other hand, with her notion of each photograph as establishing a contract of citizenship, she is recognizing the importance of the photograph as a dynamic site of evidence and contestation.

These theoretical insights lead Azoulay to an important methodological innovation. Because the photographic image always functions within a context of contestation, which can profoundly change the meaning and political significance of the image, but also because photographs potentially represent a “civil contract” with ethical implications for subject, photographer, and spectator, Azoulay proposes a technique of “watching” the photograph:

The act of prolonged observation by the observer as spectator has the power to turn a still photograph into a theatre stage on which what has been frozen in the photograph comes to life. The spectator is called to take part, to move from the addressee's position to the addresser's position to take responsibility for the sense of such photographs by addressing them even further [...]. (169)

In this way the layers of significance can be unraveled through a dynamic questioning of the photograph. As Justin Carville notes, this technique "reinstates movement and temporal dimensions into the interpretation of photography as an active process" (n.p.).

Yet Azoulay remains tied to one of the basic and, I argue, most limiting, foundations in Sontag's approach. She is deeply resistant to the emotional bond that photographs create between subject and viewer. In fact she insists that she "employ[s] the term contract in order to shed terms such as 'empathy,' 'shame,' 'pity,' or 'compassion' as organizers of this gaze" (17). In this she echoes Sontag's hostility to emotional engagement with photographs. Despite Azoulay's disavowal of any emotional content "as organizers of this gaze," her account is filled with bitter descriptions of human rights violations during the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories and their photographic representation, that are clearly driven by her emotional engagement with the suffering experienced by the subjects of the images. And who can forget Sontag's heart-felt description (in *On Photography*) of her own response to photographs of the concentration camps at Bergen-Belsen and Dachau at the age of twelve: "Nothing I have seen – in photographs or real life – ever cut me as sharply, deeply, instantaneously." She acknowledged the emotional impact of such images with this confession: "When I looked at those photographs, something broke. [...] I felt irrevocably grieved, wounded [...] something is still crying" (20).

For a recognition of the intense emotional link, what Barthes calls the *punctum*, that is not solely limited to personal relationships but is created between the subjects, photographers, and viewers of traumatic photographs, we need to turn to another recent protest against the prevailing model of photographic theory. In *Radiant Cruelty*, the American photography critic, Susie Linfield, presents an

impassioned argument for the necessity of looking at images of trauma and atrocity. While she acknowledges the difficulty of this process, she insists on the fundamental importance of the emotional bond that such photographs can create with the viewer. (She suggests that the reason critics of photography such as Sontag are so dismissive of emotion is because they are trying to distance themselves from a feminine perspective.) Linfield is not a theorist, though; she writes to defend her own critical practice, but she is acutely aware of the complexity of looking at photographs of warfare and trauma. She is conscious that such photographs can prompt unexpected and undesired responses in viewers and can also have very different meanings. She points out that many of the Holocaust photographs that now prompt disgust and sympathy for the victims were taken by Nazi photographers intent on documenting their successes in destroying hated “subhuman” populations. For example, she mentions the now iconic image of the boy in short pants and his hands in the air, photographed amongst those rounded up after the unsuccessful Warsaw ghetto uprising in 1944. Linfield shows that the image was part of an album commissioned by the SS Officer in charge of clearing out the population of the ghetto.

Linfield argues that it is necessary to look at and engage with photographs of atrocities and human rights violations because the perpetrators of these acts have endeavored to keep their actions hidden from view. In the same spirit it is necessary to engage with the photos that are available from the Bush War because not to do so is to continue the policy of censorship which operated during the war years. From Azoulay, we can take a methodology of “watching” such photographs and recognize that “the photograph is subject to negotiation that unfailingly takes place vis-à-vis a single, stable, permanent image” (27). The significance of the images of the Border War which appeared in the South African media, their function and the difference in their meanings between when they appeared and now need to be teased out through the kind of “watching” that Azoulay has applied to photographs of the 2nd Intifada in *The Civil Contract of Photography*.

5. Conclusion

This engagement with the visual legacy of the Border War seems particularly necessary at a point when the war is beginning to become part of the public discourse in South Africa, when private memories are entering cultural or public memory. What emerges from this survey of various positions in photographic theory is a growing awareness of the complexity of any engagement with the photographic object. From this perspective photographs are granted the kind of respect that has long been given to the literary text. Photographs, looked at closely enough, and examined with an awareness of how they can both speak the truth and lie, are essential building blocks of complex modern historical memories.

The debate has moved from naïve celebration of the veracity of the photographic image through Sontag's and Barthes' suspicion of the ideological power of the photograph to an awareness that the photograph is a complex site of meaning-making, communication and social negotiation, which involves not just the photograph itself but also the subject and the viewer. From this perspective, the reason that making constructed photographs can be meaningful is because photographs can now be viewed as sites for complex transactions of memory work and understanding. This perspective however is rooted in a consciously political appropriation of the complexity of the photographic image. For an important example of an artistic engagement with this complexity, in my next chapter I will examine the practice of the American photographer, David Levinthal.

CHAPTER 4

MINIATURISATION AND CULTURAL MEMORY: A CASE STUDY

1. Introduction

Although photographic theory has assumed various attitudes towards the photograph itself, a common thread in all of these has been the assertion that photography constructs rather than simply captures the real. The reception of photography within the world of art has also been troubled by the technology's relation to the real; yet, by contrast with the debates in photographic theory, photography's reception as art has been problematic because of an assumption that the technology has direct access to the real.

In this context the work of the American photographer David Levinthal became an important artistic reference for my project. As I will discuss at length in this chapter, Levinthal's work is significant for my own practice because it challenges the orthodox views of what photography, and more particularly art photography, can be. Levinthal deliberately places artifice and construction in the foreground of his photographic/artistic practice and uses the photography of miniatures to exploit the ambiguity of the photograph's relation to the real. His work is also important because it introduces the element of play into image making. I will argue that his photographs link the creative process of identity formation through popular culture and align this to dangerous possibilities, to approaching the real through fantasy and playfulness.

In this chapter I will situate Levinthal's work in the context of contemporary art photography and analyze the powerful 'doubling effect,' an insistent questioning of reality and representation, that he achieves through his photographs of tableaux of posed miniature figurines in his projects *Hitler Moves East* (1977), *Mein Kampf* (1996), and *I.E.D.* (2009).

2. Levinthal as Photographer

Levinthal has been photographing 'toys' since the 1970s. Although his work clearly derives from strong personal compulsions, he is now recognized as a precursor of the trend towards constructed/staged photography that has flourished since the 1980s in both the USA and Europe. However, Levinthal does not only construct the scenes he photographs; he also draws extensively on pre-existing images, especially from popular culture. As such his work has been interpreted as part of an important strand of postmodernism in contemporary art.

Levinthal's work is now represented in many major museum collections, including the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, The Menil Collection, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. *Dark Light*, a ten-year survey exhibition of his work, was organized by the Photographer's Gallery in London in 1994 and travelled throughout the United Kingdom; while in 1997, the International Center of Photography in New York presented a major US retrospective of his work. (davidlevinthal.com n.pag.)

So far, Levinthal's work has received limited critical attention. No monograph has yet been devoted to the photographer himself. The only sustained critical engagement with his work as a whole consists in the essays which were published in his retrospective exhibition catalogue at the International Center of Photography.³⁴ Writings on particular exhibitions by Levinthal have only appeared as exhibition catalogue essays. The conspicuous exception to this is a study of Levinthal's 1996 exhibition, *Mein Kampf*, by the Holocaust scholar, James Young, which was included in his collection of essays *At Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture*, in 2000. Levinthal's work tends to be examined within discussions of larger

³⁴ Charles Stainback, "Reruns from History: Cowboys, Nazis, and Babes in Toyland," and Richard B. Woodward, "Toy Stories: David Levinthal and the Uncertainty Principle."

developments such as staged photography³⁵ or postmodernism, perspectives that throw useful light on his practice but do not do justice to the complexity of his images or his concerns as an artist.

I will argue that Levinthal's obsessive focus on 'toys' and 'miniatures' as the subject of his photographs has been responsible for his marginality within the history of contemporary art photography. His use of toys to explore controversial themes is also responsible for the misunderstandings and controversy generated by many of his projects.

These misunderstandings have been aggravated by Levinthal's refusal to provide theoretical justifications for this work. To the contrary, most of his explanations are deliberately misleading and playful. As his long-time collaborator, the cartoonist Garry Trudeau notes:

To hear David Levinthal talk about his art is to sometimes come away with the impression that he couldn't possibly be up to anything consequential. He smiles too much. He's too self-effacing, too slow to rationalize any ambiguities in his work. (qtd. in Parry)

3. Levinthal and the History of Art Photography

A scion of a wealthy and successful family of Jewish professionals from California, Levinthal studied towards a BA in Studio Art at Stanford University before getting accepted to the graduate programme in Photography at the Yale School of Art in 1971. 1971 was a significant year at the Yale School because it was the first year that it began to award a masters of fine arts in photography. Prior to 1971, photography was considered part of Graphic Design at the Yale School.

The recognition of photography as a distinct field of artistic practice at Yale was largely due to the appointment of the photographer Walker Evans to the Yale

³⁵ See Hoy, Anne H. *Fabrications: Staged, Altered, and Appropriated Photographs* (1987).

Faculty (Fernandez n.pag.). As a result of Evans's influence the approach towards photography taught at the Yale School was strongly orientated towards what would later be categorized as "modernist formalism" – the attempt, following Clement Greenberg's influential example in the field of painting, to win recognition for photography as a fine art by the adoption of a set of medium-specific aesthetics.

Initially these aesthetics were derived from the practice of modernist photographers, notably Paul Strand, in the first decade of the twentieth century. By mid-century, they came to be allied with the espousal of Abstract Expressionist painting by Clement Greenberg. Greenberg asserted that all forms of art had to find their justification through an engagement with the characteristics of their medium.³⁶ His credo played no small part in the elevation of abstract painting to the dominant art form of American art in the 1950s and '60s; but it was also very influential in fostering a distinctly modernist aesthetics of photography such as that practised by Walker Evans.

Since the invention of photography in the mid-nineteenth century, the relationship between photography and the fine arts has been notoriously problematic. On the one hand, photography, with its apparently effortless ability to provide an exact image of the world through a mechanical/optical/chemical process, seemed to provide a solution to the problem of realistic representation in Western Art. But on the other hand, the apparent lack of artistic subjectivity in the mechanical creation of the image seemed to exclude photography from recognition as a fine art.

³⁶ See Greenberg's formulation in his essay, "Modernist Painting:" "Each art had to determine, through the operations peculiar to itself, the effects peculiar and exclusive to itself. By doing this each art would, to be sure, narrow its area of competence, but at the same time it would make its possession of that area all the more secure. It quickly emerged that the unique and proper area of competence of each art coincided with all that was unique to the nature of its medium"(5).

Initially, artist-photographers sought to gain recognition for their creativity and individual vision through imitation of the visual style of pre-existing art movements. This was achieved through the skilful manipulation of the photographic image, either in the printing of the negatives or else through direct work on the print. But this approach, labeled “Pictorialism,” was decisively rejected in the early years of the twentieth century by the adoption of a modernist aesthetics which emphasized the unique qualities of the photographic image as a medium. Hermut and Alison Gernsheim, whose magisterial history of camera technology published in 1955 was an important document of this formal modernism, dismissed previous approaches towards art photography in absolute terms:

Misconceived notions of the proper functions of photography were brought to photography by third-rate artists, who abandoned their former profession in favour of the new art, which held out greater prospects for a rise to eminence, and proved more lucrative into the bargain. Some of the worst examples of ‘High Art’ photography were produced by artists who – failing to appreciate the function of photography, and also its limitations – attempted to ‘raise’ it from the reproduction of everyday things to the portrayal of ‘loftier’ subjects totally alien to the new medium. Attempts to illustrate scenes from literature, drama, and history, or allegorical subjects by a medium whose chief contribution to art lies in its realism must inevitably result in incongruous effects. (245)

The modernists were also responding to the proliferation of smaller cameras and easy-to-print film technologies beginning with George Eastman’s Kodak system in 1888. In this context serious photographers were no longer situating themselves in relation to the established fine arts but also in opposition to popular and amateur photography.

This modernist aesthetic of photography was successfully promoted in the United States by the photographer/gallerist/publisher Alfred Stiglitz through his journal *Camera Work* in the first decades of the twentieth century. His efforts as advocate for these tendencies were finally recognized by the major institutions of the art world when the New York Museum of Modern Art established a Photography Department with Beaumont Newhall as the first, and very

influential, Curator of Photography in 1935 (Phillips 35). Newhall's "main tenets – the photographer as autonomous artist, [and] the original print as personal expression" – were the basis for the creation of a pantheon of male modernist masters which featured Alfred Stieglitz, Paul Strand, Edward Western and Walker Evans (Phillips 48). Under Newhall and his followers, the ideal of art-photography solidified into the modernist goal of producing beautiful images expressing the subjectivity of the photographer. This goal was achieved by attention to the formal elements of composition and the skilful manipulation of the tonal contrasts in black and white prints, with a strict fidelity to the world being photographed. Although the development of a modernist pantheon of art photography was rather more complicated and diverse than later critics would allow (Phillips 48), by the time that Jan Szarkowski was appointed to head up the MOMA Department of Photography in 1962 this version of a 'photographic' aesthetic was dominant in American art museums.

The modernist struggle to win a place for photography in the art museum was also a campaign to create a market for photographs as fine art objects. However, the mechanical reproducibility of the photograph – an important characteristic of photography as a medium – was a core problem left unsolved by the modernists. Since the development of negative-positive technology in the nineteenth century, the camera had the potential to produce endless reproductions of the image through the negative-positive printing process. During the course of the century this process was extended into publication with technologies such as photogravure that made illustrated magazines into popular media. The German Marxist critic Walter Benjamin analyzed the impact of this technology in his influential 1936 essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Production." Writing at a time when photo magazines and mass photo reproductions were becoming increasingly ubiquitous, Benjamin recognized the radical implications of these developments for aesthetics. The mechanically reproduced image had, in his view, put an end to the unique aura of the single art-work and with it the "theology" of modernist art aesthetics. However, at the same time in America, the champions of this modernist aesthetics applied to photography, such as Stieglitz, Newhall, and (later)

Szarkowski, sought to turn art photographs into unique objects through their criticism and the practice of “editioning” limited numbers of artists’ prints (Phillips 29).

4. Levinthal as a Critical Postmodernist

This, then, was the environment in which Levinthal studied photography at the graduate level, but he brought to the sternly modernist atmosphere of the Yale photography course a more playful and conceptual approach towards the camera and its possible subject matter. On the one hand this may have been because of the influence of conceptual photo-art in his home state of California, where, since the late 1960s, Ed Ruscha and John Baldessari had been subverting photographic conventions; but on the other hand, Levinthal’s approach was strongly informed by his own idiosyncratic and obsessive engagement with toy soldiers. When asked by one of his photography lecturers at Yale, “Why don’t you take pictures of the real world, of reality?” Levinthal claims that he answered “These toys *are* my reality!” (Young 44). Levinthal has recalled that he played obsessively with toy soldiers from the age of eleven, and was still engaging in this activity during his freshman year at Stanford, where “he filled two rooms in the family house with the figures and played with them during vacations behind locked doors” (Parry). The fact that he played with his toy soldiers “behind locked doors” suggests the incongruousness of a man his age engaging in this kind of activity.

After some unsuccessful attempts to follow the “lyrical documentary” version of photographic modernism espoused by Evans and his Yale lecturers, Levinthal took the bold step of trying to photograph his toy soldiers in carefully arranged table-top tableaux. He shot the figurines in extreme close-up, making use of the camera’s capacity to make scale-models appear as if they were life-size, “a perceptual trick used for special effects in countless Hollywood movies” (“Reality Check” n.pag.). But Levinthal also made use of a very narrow depth of field in his images, with the result that most of the subject was thrown out of focus, further adding to the effect of realism in the images. Levinthal exaggerated the limited

focus in his images by printing them on Kodalith paper, “designed primarily for use in graphic arts processes” (Levinthal, *Hitler Moves East* Technical Information), which allowed him to exaggerate the photographic grain in the images and to manipulate the tones to imitate the 35mm film stock used by classic war photographers such as Frank Capra.

Not surprisingly, Levinthal’s approach was not understood by his lecturers at Yale. His work was in fact “one of the earliest examples of full-scale studio-based tableaux” to appear in photography at the time (Gauss 176), so it is little wonder that this was not recognized by his teachers. One person at Yale who did appreciate what Levinthal was doing with his models and the camera was the cartoonist Garry Trudeau, also studying towards an MFA but in Graphic Design. He later recalled the “startling” effect that Levinthal’s photographs had on him. “The images had a disorientating sense of authenticity about them. The models appeared caught in the middle of some dream-like transfiguration into the actual instruments of war” (Levinthal, *Hitler Moves East* 7).

For his MFA thesis in Graphic Design, Trudeau had been working on “a series of narrative collages depicting ten years in the fictional career of a fictional Luftwaffe flight lieutenant, one Erich Becker.” Although the two projects had very little in common besides a mutual interest in the German experience of the Second World War, there was enough fascination between them for each other’s projects that they decided to pursue a collaborative book-length work following their graduation in 1973. Trudeau, who had been struggling to find enough archival images for his project, dropped the Becker character and instead attempted to tell the story of the German invasion of Russia using Levinthal’s photographs together with archival material.

Unlike the Western conflict during the Second World War, which was extensively covered by photographers, the German war in Russia was barely visible to North Americans such as Levinthal and Trudeau during the 1970s. Levinthal later recalled that the British television series on the Russian campaign, broadcast on the American Public Broadcasting Service in 1978, was “appropriately called

“The Unknown War” (*I.E.D.* 5). The choice of the German campaign in Russia was significant because the limited number of available images from the campaign forced Levinthal to imagine his way into the visualization through his play with his toy soldiers. Here we see an important resonance with my own ‘BOS’ project. For Levinthal the absence of a photographic archive from the Eastern Campaign created the conditions for his imaginative play with constructed images.

The production took over three years, during which Levinthal’s characteristic mode of working with his models began to emerge. James E. Young describes the process:

Then came the hundreds of hours spent arranging these soldiers just so, even planting an indoor lawn to resemble the Ukrainian steppes and mixing explosive charges that would blow their toys sky-high for the sake of a photograph. (49)

Levinthal’s photographs, matched with the narrative devices that Trudeau had been experimenting with in his graphic design thesis, resulted in a book length narrative, *Hitler Moves East*, which was strikingly innovative. Trudeau achieved a fluid integration of archival documents and war photographs as graphic elements in a “sequential montage” linked through what he called a “cinematic relationship” (7). The effect of this sequential montage on Levinthal’s photographs was dramatic. Inserted into a context of “actual” war photographs, documents, and writings such as letters and postcards, Levinthal’s images acquired more complex connotations. As David Company notes: “The images mimic war photography but reveal their own artifice at the same time. There is no simple rejection of the historical photograph here but a review of its often unquestioned authority” (21).

This “commixture of invented photographic images and historical narrative,” as Young describes it (49), or “Paper Movie” as Trudeau calls it (“Preface” 8), fell – at the time of its first publication – outside any existing categories. As Levinthal remembers: “At the time when the book came out in 1977 it was put in the History section, because there was not a comparable art photography genre to put it in” (Wolcott n.pag.).

Trudeau's career as a political cartoonist had meanwhile taken off. (He won the first Pulitzer Prize ever to be awarded for Cartooning in 1975 while they were working on *Hitler Moves East*.) But Levinthal, not seeing much future for himself as an art-photographer, took up teaching for a while and then studied for a degree in Business Management, after which he co-founded and co-directed a public relations firm in Menlo Park, California.

However, two developments in the wider field of photography and contemporary art would provide a meaningful perspective on Levinthal's innovative practice. In retrospect Levinthal has said that he was "working with the concept of staged photography" (*I.E.D.* 5), which would suggest that he was aware that his work coincided with the beginnings of a widespread experimentation with "staged" or "constructed" photography in America that became prominent in the 1980s. This tendency was first recognized by the critic A.D. Coleman in 1976, who labeled it the "directorial mode;"³⁷ yet Levinthal, at work at the time on his images for the *Hitler Moves East* project, is not mentioned by Coleman. Nor was Levinthal included in the first exhibition to gather together works with this tendency, the "Fabricated to be Photographed" exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1979.³⁸ As Mary Warner Marien concludes:

The lack of an overarching "-ism" for staged photographs may owe to the fact that it was not an art movement driven by a core of beliefs, but an approach that interested image-makers with different artistic perspectives and ideological positions. (455)

Staged photography fitted in very well with postmodernism's interest in playing with different ontological worlds, but it was the intellectual project of critical postmodernism that was to create a climate more conducive to the recognition of

³⁷ Coleman's essay originally appeared in the September 1976 issue of *Art Forum*. It was reprinted in his collected essays from the period, *Light Readings: A Photography Critic's Writings 1968-1973*.

³⁸ Van Coke, Deren, *Fabricated to be Photographed* (1979). The first European exhibition of this work was Kohler, Michael. *Constructed Realities: The Art of the Staged Photograph* (1989).

Levinthal's work as art. In 1983, his work was included in an important exhibition of postmodernist photography in New York. Entitled "In Plato's Cave" and curated by the influential critic Abigail Solomon-Godeau, the exhibition presented Levinthal's photographs of miniature tableaux together with photographs by Ellen Brooks, James Casebere, Sarah Charlesworth, Laurie Simmons and James Wellings. His inclusion in the "Surrogate Selves" exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. in 1989 further reinforced Levinthal's credentials as a postmodernist by presenting his work together with that of Laurie Simmons and Cindy Sherman. It was after the success of this exhibition that Levinthal moved to New York and took up a career as an artist-photographer.

Levinthal's student work was driven by a fascination with toys, not just as a photographer but as a collector and *player* (my emphasis). The *Hitler Moves East* photographs were sparked by Levinthal's discovery of cheap Japanese-made sets of plastic German soldiers from the Second World War and his imaginative engagement with these figures through creative play. The way that the photographs evolved from his interactions and play with these soldiers has been characteristic of all his work since then. His creative work was based on his complex relationship with the significance of the toy figures: "I was drawn to these figures in large part because I was both amazed at their existence and fascinated by what they represent" (Levinthal, *I.E.D.* 5). This suggests that Levinthal was not simply using the toys as props for his photographs, but that his art came out of his play and his child-like relationship to the toys, together with his adult awareness of the larger cultural context from which the toys were produced.

This creative process is what he later described as "object-driven," a term which captures his engagement with particular toys leading to a project of imagining them in serial engagements or narratively driven tableaux. Yet the toys and figurines that have attracted Levinthal's attention as a collector and artist are all products of mass production. Charles Stainback notes that "Levinthal was among the first postmodern photographers to draw imagery from our culture's

storehouse of pictures, objects, myths and symbols" (29); and this was clearly because of his already existing fascination with toys as complex bearers of cultural significance. Postmodernism as a cultural movement shared Levinthal's interest in the power of images within popular culture. In the broader artistic climate of the American art world what "began as a Dada-like joke and a vaguely rebellious gesture toward Yale art-school faculty" (Woodward 40), led to Levinthal's being recognized as belonging to the first wave of "critical postmodernism" in photography.

Although postmodernism has become a catch-all term for an entire phase of culture in the capitalist West, it is useful to examine Levinthal's work in the more specific context of postmodernist photography as it first emerged on the New York art scene in the late 1970s. It is important to recall that at this early stage, works by the leading figures such as Cindy Sherman, Sherrie Levine and Richard Prince were "largely unsaleable and quite literally incomprehensible to all but a handful of critics and a not much larger group of other artists" (Solomon-Gadeau, *Photography at the Dock* 136). The ascription of the term 'postmodern' by critical advocates of their photography such as Douglas Crimp, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, and Rosalind Krauss was a precise description of shared strategies and techniques. As Crimp insisted: "If postmodernism is to have a theoretical value, it cannot be used merely as another chronological term; rather it must disclose the particular nature of the breach with modernism" (Crimp, "Pictures" 87). What these artists had in common was the recognition that a photograph was an element in a complex image system. Contrary to the art-photographers and their fetishized prints, the work of these artist-photographers was ironic and intellectual and presented itself as investigations into the iconic and ideological power of images within contemporary culture. Hence the title, "Pictures," that Crimp chose for the first exhibition that gathered together the work of Sherrie Levine, Jack Goldstein, Tory Brauntuch, Robert Longo and Philip Smith, as examples of the new category "postmodernist photography" in 1977 (Crimp, "Photographic Activity" 91).

In striking contrast to the modernist art photography in the museums, this postmodernist practice was driven by artists with little or no interest in the history of photography, or in achieving technical excellence in the medium. Most of them thought of themselves as artists and not photographers. Their predecessors were located in a range of different developments in the American/European art scene during the 1960s, most importantly Pop Art and Conceptual/Performance Art. All these earlier movements had in common a rejection of traditional craft skills (the so-called 'deskilling' of the artist) and a subversive rejection of the autonomous art object. Pop Artists such as Richard Hamilton, Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol lifted images from popular culture and used techniques that did not traditionally belong to 'high art' such as collage, assemblage and silk-screen reproduction to make their works. This was a radically different approach towards the photographic image than that taken by the formal modernists, with their attention to the finer qualities of texture and tone in editioned prints. The Pop Artists were responding to the proliferation of images in popular culture and the media, not by withdrawing into an aesthetics of subjectivity, but by mining the new image world of iconic figures such as Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley and the Electric Chair, and treating these images as 'found objects.' At around the same time, a new line of Performance artists made use of the camera simply as a convenient means to record their transient performance pieces; while Conceptual artists, in their project to isolate ideas from their expression in any particular medium, also seized on the camera as an accessible mechanical recording device.

Benefitting from the demystification of photographic practice by these movements, 'postmodernist photographic practice' was further infused with a much stronger intellectual interrogation of the power of the image. Walter Benjamin's insights into the implications of mechanical image reproduction laid the ground for a critique of modernist art aesthetics, particularly the 'theology' of the unique art object and its mystical 'aura.' But in addition to this perspective, the critics who championed this new approach were strongly influenced by the European intellectual movements of structuralism and semiotics, in particular by the Marxist inflection of this thinking that was introduced through the writings

of the French critic, Roland Barthes. In a series of influential essays, notably *Mythologies* (discussed in the previous chapter), Barthes used semiology to isolate the manner in which social codes make use of the apparent transparency of the photograph as a key support in the operation of ideological systems. These ideas were particularly attractive to young women artists influenced by the Feminist critique of how patriarchy operated as a repressive system of representations. Abigail Solomon-Godeau, an important figure in the critical elaboration of this work, used a quotation from Barthes as an epigraph to her influential 1982 essay, "Playing in the Fields of the Image." Barthes's observation that "a code cannot be destroyed, only 'played off'" was a central organizing principle behind an approach towards photography that was at once cerebral, ironic and critical, yet playful. Through this inflection, Solomon-Godeau gave a more specific political emphasis to the reading of these new kinds of photographic works. She applied the qualifier "critical postmodernism" to distinguish the work of artist-photographers such as Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger and Richard Prince from the neo-conservative postmodernism of New York Expressionist painters such as Julian Schnabel and David Salle, who were also rising to prominence in the American art world of the early 1980s.

The approach shared by the critical postmodernists was in sharp contrast to the art photographers and the modernist photographic aesthetic which had been recognized by museums and print connoisseurs. Art photography with its emphasis on the authenticity and originality of the individual artist's subjective vision had not only become exhausted in its strategy of isolating photography from the profusion of images circulating in contemporary culture; it had become irrelevant to the concerns of a younger generation of artists. Most damaging of all, art photography, with its emphasis on perfected prints, seemed to be trying to ignore the mechanical reproducibility which was one of the most significant aspects of photography as a medium.

This obtuseness in the 'photographic' aesthetic of modernism was archly satirized by the most radical of the 'critical postmodernists,' Sherrie Levine.

Levine set herself to deconstruct the 'aura' of well-known masterpieces of the American art-photography pantheon through a tactic of re-photographing or "appropriating" the works. Her black and white photographs of classic photographs (made by photographing posters or book reproductions of these photographs) were exhibited with deadpan titles such as "Untitled (After Edward Western)" for a copy of Edward Western's nude study of his son's torso. Her defenders proclaimed that her strategy was an exemplary 'deconstruction' of the myth of the (male) photographer as original artist, and that her 'appropriations' undermined the authority and institutional valuation of the art-photography system. The threats of prosecution for copyright violation by the estates representing the 'appropriated' photographers seemed to be a confirmation of Levine's radical status (Nesbit 253–54).

Richard Prince also re-photographed pre-existing images, but took a different approach towards 'appropriation.' He played with the power of iconic images circulating in the popular media. Using a serial technique derived from Conceptualism, he worked with severely cropped fragments of advertising images and popular magazine photographs which he enlarged up to epic scale. His appropriations were hailed as exposing the patterns of desire manipulated in advertizing and the popular media.

The photographs of Cindy Sherman were perhaps most important because they extended this interrogation of cultural codes to an investigation of the role of media images in the construction of the self. Working on her "Untitled Movie Stills" – a long duration series that evolved over many years – she photographed herself in a variety of different poses and outfits that seemed to be fragments and echoes of the self as imagined through scenes in stock movie genres such as the *film noire*, or the thriller, or the television situation comedy. In highlighting the relationship between media representations and female subjectivity, Sherman's postmodernism was strongly influenced by Feminist critiques of the working of patriarchal culture. Sherman's Feminist critique of the image in contemporary culture was shared by other female postmodernists such as Barbara Kruger and Laurie Simmons. Kruger also appropriated images from popular culture but

transformed them with the addition of harshly ironic texts, while Simmons, taking an approach that corresponded to Levinthal's use of the tableau, experimented with photographs of scenes using arrangements of girls' domestic play sets and dolls.

In this context, aspects of Levinthal's work were recognized as sharing the spirit of postmodernist photography. *Hitler Moves East*, initially unclassifiable in existing categories, was eventually 'discovered' by the critical postmodernists. As Garry Trudeau recalls:

What was [*Hitler Moves East*]? Photography? History? Fantasy? A toy catalogue? The book made no sense in any conventional terms so it was turned over to the art world, where it was eventually ratified as an artistic triumph[. . .]. ("Afterword" 84)

In the context of critical postmodernism, Levinthal's work made a great deal of sense. (Reputedly Cindy Sherman found a copy of *Hitler Moves East* and was a great admirer of the book (Benfey n.pag.)) Like the Feminist photography, particularly of Laurie Simmons, who also worked with toys and miniature representations in tableaux, Levinthal is concerned with toys as particularly potent forms of mythology and stereotype. A strand running through all his work is the recognition that toys play an important part in naturalizing specific roles and in embedding stereotypes for elaboration in adult identity.

From *Wild West*, the project that followed *Hitler Moves East*, where he photographed tableaux of the conflict between toy cowboys and Indians, to his most recent (and most controversial) project on black stereotypes in *Black Face*, Levinthal has explored the power of these representations (Benfry n.pag.). In important ways, a common theme underlying his work has been that he subverts the apparent 'innocence' of the toy. Throughout his career he has emphasized this aspect of his work: "Toys are intriguing, and I want to see what I can do with them. On a deeper level, they represent one way that society socializes its young" (qtd. in Stainback and Woodward 20).

The wave of critical postmodernist photography had begun to subside and dissipate by the late 1980s. The critical advocates of the tendency, such as Solomon-Godeau, watched in disgust as their protégés were embraced by the very art market that they were supposed to oppose. Richard Prince's re-photographs set a record price on fine art auctions. Levine claimed that she was no different from David Salle and Julian Schnabel, while her 'appropriations' of the modernist photographers were comfortably exhibited together with the originals at the International Center of Photography (Solomon-Gadeau, *Photography at the Dock* 124-48).

5. Levinthal at play with the real

While Levinthal won recognition amongst the critical postmodernists, and shared many common concerns with them, his work cannot be fully understood within that historically constrained moment in art history. The identification of his work with the movement did serve to highlight his complex and critical engagement with the images of popular culture, but his obsessive pursuit of this engagement continues beyond the critical moment of this movement. That said, Levinthal nevertheless shares with another strand of postmodernist photographic practice a concern with exploring the illusionary and constructed nature of photographic representation.

In his catalogue essay to Levinthal's International Centre of Photography retrospective exhibition, Charles Stainback identifies a quality that is specific to all Levinthal's practice as an artist-photographer: "Levinthal's images are not simply illusions mistaken for reality but images produced as pseudo-surrogates of reality – fake fakes" ("Reruns from History" 23).

All Levinthal's work is concerned with exploiting the ambiguity of photography, in particular the tension between the photograph as a reliable document and its status as a contrived representation. In this sense, his work is closest to the strand of postmodernist photographic practice represented by James Welling and James Casebere, both artists who were part of the crucial "In Plato's Cave"

exhibition in 1983. These are postmodernists whose concerns, according to Hal Foster et al, are

more internal to photography, more committed to its traditions and techniques, but all the more deconstructive of it as a result. Rather than challenge the referential dimension of the photograph, they insist on it, but in a non-realist way that exploits the slight ambiguity of the photographic signifier. (588)

Welling was one of the critical postmodernists first recognized by Abigail Solomon-Godeau and included, together with Levinthal, in her "In Plato's Cave" exhibition. His enigmatic images of materials such as velvet, crushed aluminium foil, and flakes of pastry dough are photographed in extreme close-up and given titles that hint at underlying romantic themes, which are somehow alluded to but deliberately excluded from the image frame. This 'doubling' effect in which "the photographic image simultaneously elicits and frustrates meaning" is described by Solomon-Godeau as "an important component of much postmodern practice and utterly central to Welling's work" ("Playing in the Field" 100).

James Casebere has also "played with the ambiguity of the photograph since the late seventies" (Foster et al 588). In his moody black and white photographs he creates uncertainty through the presentation of miniature scenes built out of white board and Styrofoam which, together with his choice of titles, evoke memories of the Old West, the American Civil War, the pre-war South. His strangely evocative but empty scenes are carefully lit to create a sense of uncertainty and menace.

The use of miniature scenes lit cinematically is what Levinthal has in common with Casebere and Welling, but Levinthal's photographs are distinguished by the miniature figures which are the object of his complex fascination. Levinthal has often spoken about the importance of the 'doubling effect' that he achieves through the use of a variety of deliberate photographic techniques. As Levinthal has frequently declared: "I'm happiest when the line [between illusion and reality] is blurred."

Like Welling and Casebere he makes use of the extreme close-up to fill the frame with his miniature figures. But unlike Welling and Casebere, Levinthal makes primary use of miniature figures as the subjects of his photographs. This creates difficulties for his project of achieving the doubling effect. Levinthal has to avoid close-ups which reveal too much detail of the faces of his figurines. His toys exist in a liminal reality. By comparison, Laurie Simmons with her emphasis on the “toyness” of the models in her tableaux has produced one series of extreme magnifications of toy heads.³⁹ Levinthal, however, exploits a visual expectation similar to that which has been analyzed by the philosopher Barbara E. Savedoff. Her analysis applies specifically to photographs of representations, and in particular to the strange effect that photographs can have of making the representation of persons or animate beings seem animate. The example she gives in her analysis is the famous Walker Evans photograph *Torn Movie Poster* (1930), in which a damaged wall poster fills the frame of the photograph. Savedoff asserts that the macabre effect of the tear in the poster, which cuts across the woman in the poster’s face, is because of an “equivalence of object and its representation” which is achieved through the flatness of the photograph’s surface. She calls this effect “a double vision” (94), a term echoing Levinthal’s own description of his practice. More directly relevant to Levinthal’s practice, she goes on to analyze the effects achieved through photographs of sculptures and mannequins. In these cases, she argues that our expectation that the photograph can freeze movement through rapid shutter speed creates an equivalence between a photograph of an inanimate figure/sculpture and a living subject. Both mannequin and living human subject are rendered equally static by the effect of the photograph. The result is that a photograph of a mannequin appears eerily animate. Underlying all these effects is our tendency to perceive photographs as documents of the real world: “This is one of the central fascinations of photography – its power to ‘document’ an unfamiliar world which is at the same time *our* world, transformed” (Savedoff’s emphasis, 105).

³⁹ Laurie Simmons and Allan McCullum – the *Actual Photos* series – “portraits of fifty-one tiny human figures from model train sets, photographed through a microscope at a pathology lab, 1985.” *Laurie Simmons*, interviewed by Sarah Charlesworth. New York: Art Resources Transfer Inc, 1994. 77.

The doubling effect is fundamental to Levinthal's deliberate effect on his viewers. Although he has continued to explore this effect, he has not simply adopted the extreme close-up in order to evoke the effect of miniatures as real; he has also made skillful use of the narrow plane of focus in his images. This is carefully manipulated to stimulate the viewer's imaginative engagement with his images. The out-of-focus effect, which often fills most of his composition, creates a sense of uncertainty around his subjects, a dissolving of the real (model) which paradoxically suggests a greater realism. As James E. Young has perceptively observed: "The essential tension in Levinthal's medium is that between the toy's fixedness and the camera's seeming liquefaction of its material hardness" (52).

The *Washington Post* critic Frank Van Riper has described this effect at work in Levinthal's Baseball series:

Levinthal said he prefers using Polaroid not only for the instant feedback it provides, but more important, for the richness of its color. Another important element, I believe, is the incredibly short focusing distance on the 20x24 camera, especially when using a long 360mm lens. This creates a very small plane of focus on each image, the result being that much of the figurine being shot is soft. Note how on the Robinson figure sharp focus falls across Jackie's chest and face, but his hands and feet are out of focus. In this case, however, the eye sees this not as softness, but as blurring caused by dramatic motion. Thus a totally stationary figure, shot with a rock steady behemoth of a camera, turns itself into a dynamic image simply because of the tools David Levinthal chose to use, and what we as viewers choose to see. (n.pag.)

More recently, Hal Foster and Rosalind Krauss have made critical comments on the continuing validity of this approach in the work of Welling and Casebere. They argue that the critique of photographic representation was necessary twenty years ago, but that a more urgent goal should now be the critique of the simulation (589). Levinthal bypasses this criticism because of his obsessive concern with toys. Unlike the subject matter of Welling and Casebere, Levinthal's choice of subjects has been stimulated by the pre-existing, mass-produced lines of toys which he has discovered in his exploration of toy shops. (This is because of the object-driven creative process which he has consistently followed.) And toys are, to an exceptional degree, powerful examples of simulations in their purest form. As Levinthal points out: "Toys exist for a reason. They allow you to

enter a fantasy world. When you're a child with a cap gun, suddenly you're a Hopalong Cassidy" (Stainback and Woodward 20). Through his play with these toys, Levinthal has developed a complex interrogation of powerful American myths in which his own dark longings and imaginings, and memories of how he received these myths as a television-addicted child, play a central role. As he revealed in a 1996 interview:

I don't think childhood is at all innocent, so why should toys be? It's a period of socialization and conformity. Boys are supposed to grow up to be strong and stalwart men, willing to die for their country, and so on. That period of one's life instills certain values. Playing with toys is innocent only in the sense that most people have passed through that stage. I suppose I never have. (Stainback and Woodward 21)

6. Levinthal in Toyland

Richard B. Woodward was the first critic to explore the significance of Levinthal's intense engagement with toys. In his essay from the ICP retrospective exhibition of Levinthal's photographs, Woodward draws from Charles Baudelaire's "The Lesson of Toys" in order to trace a filiation between Levinthal's work and the Romantic fascination with toys and automata in the nineteenth century. Baudelaire's essay, he asserts, "gave new prominence to the role of inanimate figures in the mental lives of adults and children alike" (36); the essay also helps us to recognize the dark sensibility that haunts so many of Levinthal's images. From the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm to the sophisticated short stories of Hoffman, the theme of the toy which comes to life haunts the Romantic imagination, culminating in Sigmund Freud's use of Hoffman's story "The Sandman" in order to explain his theory of the "uncanny."

Woodward claims that when Levinthal started using toy soldiers in his photographed tableaux in the early 1970s, "he was in a sense telling a gothic horror story for the late industrial age" (39). This is an important insight. Levinthal has, without exception, chosen the products of the postwar toy industry as his subject matter. From the Japanese produced packs of plastic German soldiers he used in *Hitler Moves East*, to his investigation of Barbie, to

the several projects he has done using play sets produced by the Leo Marx company in the 1950s,⁴⁰ Levinthal has always chosen to work with mass-produced miniature figurines. Unlike the toys that Baudelaire wrote about, the mass-produced toys of the late industrial (read postmodern) age have an intimate relationship with the imaging systems of the film and television industries.

These complex interactions are most clearly revealed in one of Levinthal's most important and controversial projects, his *Mein Kampf* photographs, published as a book in 1996. This project brought together the profound subject of the representation of the Holocaust with the apparent childishness of toy figurines in a manner that was troubling to many commentators. The project was sparked by Levinthal's chance discovery of a miniature Hitler figurine in an Austrian toy shop. The revelation that "German children in the '30s had miniature Hitlers to play with" (Stainback 31) initially prompted Levinthal to experiment with individual studies of the Hitler figurine. Further research, however, revealed that other figurines from the Nazi era were available in Germany. In his play with the figurines, he began to draw on a complex web of associations based on his own mediated memories of the Holocaust as a young boy growing up in California in the 1960s, and his encounters with various representations of the Nazi regime, from the films of Leni Riefenstahl to the photographs in studies of genocide. In Levinthal's case, as a Jew without any direct family connection to the Holocaust, his 'memories' of the destruction of the European Jewry were entirely built of media images gleaned from film, television, and books. The Hitler figurine still played a prominent role but was woven into a dialectic between images of Nazi spectacles and the atrocities in the camps. Young provides a useful summary of the process going on in the images of *Mein Kampf*: "It is David Levinthal's struggle between what he knows and how he has known it, between Holocaust history and how it has been passed down to him in the popular, all-too-mythologized icons of television and photographs" (50).

⁴⁰ David Levinthal, *Small Wonder: Worlds in a Box*. Essay by David Corey. Washington, D.C. National Museum of American Art/D.A.P., 1997.

Although Levinthal's process remains "object-driven," the lush colours of his large-format Polaroid images are a long way from the gritty sepia images that he produced for *Hitler Moves East*. Garry Trudeau expressed concern that the images of *Hitler Moves East* could be read as beautifying the ugliness of war, but the images in *Mein Kampf* are much more troubling in that respect.

Toys continue to be the central device in Levinthal's interrogation of the representation of war in his most recent project: *I.E.D. War in Afghanistan and Iraq*. The project appeared as a book publication in 2009, at the height of the controversy over American's unpopular pre-emptive wars in those countries following the 9/11 attacks on New York. It also marked a return to a strong engagement with text and to collaboration with the cartoonist Garry Trudeau.

I.E.D. combines photographs by Levinthal with extracts from texts published on *The Sandbox*, an online collection of military blogs (or milblogs as they are known amongst the military) which was launched in October 2006 and hosted on Garry Trudeau's *Doonesbury* blog. Although Trudeau is known for his hostility to the Bush administration's prosecution of the war, the focus of the *The Sandbox* was "not on policy and partisanship [. . .] but on the unclassified details of deployment – the everyday, the extraordinary, the wonderful, the messed up, the absurd" (Trudeau n.p.). American soldiers serving in Afghanistan and Iraq were invited to submit blog posts to *The Sandbox* in order to give the rest of America "the flavor of what life is like for troops overseas" (Trudeau, "Trudeau Compiles" [NPR interview]).

Both Trudeau and Levinthal have subsequently recognized that *Hitler Moves East* was a text that responded to the anti-Vietnam war atmosphere on American campuses in the 1970s; yet the awareness of that war was filtered through a distant and remote German campaign in Russia. As Levinthal recalls:

In the early 70s there were very few documentary photographs or films from the Eastern Front available [. . .]. This paucity of images gave Garry and me a virtually blank visual canvas. I hadn't lived through World War

II, so I was free to let my imagination merge with the documentary images that did exist and create a symbolic reality. (*I.E.D.* 5)

By contrast the war in Afghanistan and Iraq, according to Levinthal, was a “war that is brought to us virtually in real time, through cell phone images and streaming video, daily television sound bites, and a profusion of milblogs” (*I.E.D.* 4). This media saturation was accompanied by an equally profuse flood of toys and military models, not just unprecedented in quantity but also in quality. For an artist like Levinthal, following his “object-driven” process of photographic practice, the toys from the war were of particular significance. By contrast, the figures that he used 36 years earlier in the dioramas he photographed for *Hitler Moves East* were “very small and very simple unpainted plastic toy soldiers” (4).

7. Conclusion

Levinthal’s work demonstrates the multi-layered possibilities of the miniature tableau when it is used to explore powerful and controversial themes such as history, memory, and the representation of warfare and violence in photography. Levinthal’s photographs reveal the extent to which childhood play informs the adult imagination, and how the tokens of childhood play, the toys themselves, are bearers of ideology and stereotypes. Yet, the continuing attraction of Levinthal’s work is that it is not didactic. Through his own complex and obsessive engagement with these miniatures – an artistic process that is about the discovery and collecting of these objects as much as it is about their deployment in works of art – Levinthal reveals the role of models in a desiring/fascinated play.

Finally, as the photographer of these playful miniature tableaux, he has continued to investigate the complex relationship among camera, representation and our contingent expectations of the photographed subject. Through nearly forty years of exploration, Levinthal has remained an artist who allows himself to be drawn into the imagined world of his subjects with a sense of wonderment always tinged with dread.

While Levinthal has been an important reference for my project, it should be clear that this is not directly at the level of photographic or artistic style.

Levinthal has been important as an example of how an artistic practice can be developed through an engagement with miniatures and a creative exploitation of the tension between the photograph as a reliable document and as a contrived representation.

CHAPTER 5

DEMARCATING THE VISUAL ARCHIVE OF THE WAR

1. Introduction

I have demonstrated that the visual coverage of the Border war was successfully controlled in the South African media during the war years by a raft of restrictive legislation. The control of media representations of the war was an important aspect of the South African government's "total strategy" which had several significant consequences, particularly for the subsequent memory of the conflict. That the war was experienced as invisible or hidden is undoubtedly true; yet I shall argue that this perception of invisibility was due largely to the restrictions placed on a particular type of photographic practice, known as photojournalism. To explore this contention will require an investigation into the "ecology of images" produced during and after the Border war⁴¹. Although Susan Sontag has subsequently repudiated her call for an "ecology of images,"⁴² I use the term "ecology" here in its original sense to denote the interrelationship between organisms and their environment (www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary). The changing context of the different types of image that emerged from the war years, and the way that these images interact with both the personal and cultural memory of the conflict is at the roots of the BOS project.

One of the unintended effects of the control of media representations by the South African authorities was that while the reality of the conflict was cloaked

⁴¹ Here I must acknowledge a dilemma which dogs much South African scholarship in this field: the task of constructing an archive precedes the attempt to critique the same archive. The theoretical question of how to engage in recovery and critique at the same time in the context of the South African archive has been addressed at length in Caroline Hamilton et al. *Refiguring the Archive*. Cape Town: David Philip, 2002.

⁴² Sontag called for an "ecology of images" at the conclusion of *On Photography* (180) in 1977, and withdrew her call in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (110) in 2003.

and rendered invisible to the South African public, aspects of the war were made highly visible to the outside world through a limited number of iconic images that were very effectively deployed by SWAPO in an international propaganda war. These images have played an important role in the cultural memory of the war. In some senses, these images have come back to haunt the conscripts' memory of the war, in a classic example of what Freud called the "return of the repressed."

2. The Role of Photography in the Popular Imagining of Modern War

Sontag correctly asserts in *Regarding the Pain of Others* that "the understanding of war among people who have not experienced war is now chiefly a product of the impact of these images [of war photographs]" (21). This is because the direct experience of war since World War II has become less likely for the inhabitants of the West (as was also the case for the South African public during the Border War). As a result, war is a form of experience that is beyond most people's comprehension, making them entirely reliant on forms of mediated knowledge.

"War photography observes for those who are not in battle what they are missing and reminds those who were what it was like," notes Susan Moeller (3), reminding us that what is at stake is not just the soldier's ability to communicate his memories of war to a civilian population - his own memory is dependent on photographs. While formal histories remain reliant on the evidence of written texts, the popular understanding of modern wars, and more particularly the cultural memory' of contemporary war, are largely dependent on the available photographic records.

Marita Sturken makes a useful distinction between individual memory and 'cultural memory.' While an individual's memories are the core of their sense of personal identity, a 'cultural memory' is created through interactions between individuals, their narratives of their memories, and a variety of 'memory objects.' In her view, cultural memory "is produced [. . .] in various forms, including memorials, public art, popular culture, literature, commodities and activism"

(*Tangled Memories* 1). At the heart of her definition is the recognition that the field of cultural memory is political: "To define a memory as cultural is," she argues, "to enter into a debate about what that memory means" (*Tangled Memories* 1). Memories at both the individual and cultural level are fluid and unreliable; hence the need for objects that concretize particular interpretations of the past. "Images," she insists, "remain the most compelling of memory objects" (*Tangled Memories* 11). They are compelling because they function as "a technology of memory," which Sturken defines as "a mechanism through which one can construct the past and situate it in the present" (*Tangled Memories* 20).

Modern industrialized warfare and photography came into being at roughly the same time in the middle of the nineteenth century and there is compelling evidence that the two have evolved in phase with each other. For example, one of the first wars to be extensively recorded through photographs was the American Civil War (1861-65). As the scholar Alan Trachtenberg observes: "[P]hotographs defined the war, made it real, [created] a collective memory of incontrovertible meaning" (80). At the same time, the war opened up new possibilities for the distribution of new forms of photography. Matthew Brady's groundbreaking exhibition of war photographs in New York in 1862 was not only the first public presentation of images from the conflict (Rosenheim 7), it was also the "first intentionally produced collectible series of photographs in American photography" (Rosenheim 69); while Alexander Gardner's *Photographic Sketch Book of the War* in 1866 was the first instance of a dedicated book of photographs in American publishing (Rosenheim 81).

The photographs of the American Civil War were only influential after the cessation of the hostilities. The state of photographic and printing technologies in the 1860s necessitated this delay. Trachtenberg notes that the Civil War photographs were "made under trying conditions with slow, cumbersome equipment [. . . and] reveal the limits and conventions of the medium as much as the look of the war" (72). As a result, the first photographs of war were necessarily images of the *aftermath* of conflict. We know the American Civil War through the images of dead bodies scattered across the fields of Antietam and

Gettysburg, or the ruined buildings and shattered railway infrastructure left behind in Sherman's brutal march across the South. Actual combat, or even the subjective experience of the fighting soldiers, was outside of the camera's field of visibility.

While the war photography of the nineteenth century lacked the technical means to represent the experience of combat or to produce images that were contemporaneous with the actual progress of the war, the images that it did produce were a decisive challenge to the heroic representations of warfare which had been enshrined in the conventions of history painting (Moeller 24). The Civil War introduced a realism which was to be developed throughout the twentieth century, culminating in the photographic representation of the American war in Vietnam, which was often starkly at odds with the interpretation of the conflict by the military authorities.

The public impact of war photography was also dependent on the development of new printing techniques. The invention of 'half plate' technologies in the 1880s revolutionized the newspaper industry because it made it possible to combine photographs and text on the same printed page. When this printing technology was coupled with the increasingly portable cameras and fast film stocks that emerged in the early twentieth century, a powerful form of commercial war photography began to take shape. Images of warfare published in the popular press began to have an impact on wars themselves. Armed with small 35mm cameras, photographers by the 1930s were able to enter into the fury of the battle zone and take photographs that gave the readers of newspapers and pictorial magazines a sense of direct access to the experience of combat (Zelt 18–20). Embodied within the rise of commercial media, photo-journalism – photographs taken by a professional observer – came to dominate the way that war was visualized in the twentieth century. The form first rose to prominence during the Spanish Civil War, which was "the first war to be extensively and freely photographed for a mass audience, and marks the establishment of modern war photography as we know it" (Brothers 2). Strongly informed by a humanist aesthetic, commercial war photography was a form that

put great emphasis on the subjective experience of warfare and the tension between the human body and the destructive power of modern weaponry (Jeffrey 105).

In the print media photographs continued to be dominated by text (in the form of captions and written accounts) until the end of the Second World War. The unspeakable horror of the sights inside the Nazi concentration camps gave an additional importance to the visual record. The unanimous response to the discovery of the Nazi death camps by the Allied governments and editors of newspapers led to a relaxation of censorship restrictions on the kind of images that could be shown in the media and gave an unprecedented dominance to the visual image. As Barbie Zelizer summarizes:

The liberation of the camps can therefore be looked at as a critical incident in the tentative but evolving status of news photography. It offered a forum for words and images to compete and images to emerge triumphant. [...] the atrocities helped facilitate modern photojournalism's coming of age. (12)

The photography of the Holocaust camps was also an imagery of the aftermath. Although subsequent critics have argued that the Holocaust was an indictment of Western culture in general, this is not how the camp images were presented in the media at the time. The Holocaust images were published as evidence of Nazi or German barbarism and were interpreted from that perspective (Zelizer 86).

3. Photojournalism and the Vietnam War

Several critics have argued that the reason why the experience of the Vietnam War was such a powerful blow to Western and particularly American self-esteem was because the Second World War was presented as such a 'good' war, and one in which the media rallied behind the war effort. By contrast the visualization of the war in Vietnam often opposed the official claims. It was the media reports on the North Vietnamese invasion during Tet (the Vietnamese new year) that smashed the credibility of the American military's claims that the war in early 1968 was almost won (Moeller 352). Even more dramatic was the extensive and

wide-ranging visual coverage after Tet, which showed the impact of the war on the Vietnamese civilian population and revealed atrocities committed by American forces. In late 1969, the American public first heard about the massacre of the inhabitants of a Vietnamese village called My Lai. The story was broken through a television interview with one of the soldiers who participated in the massacre, but it was the colour photographs in *Life* magazine a few weeks later that “literally brought the massacre home to civilian America” (Turner 40). One letter writer to *Life*, himself an ex-Marine, described the effect as follows: “the picture in your issue was like a knife in my heart”(qtd. in Turner 40).

With the hindsight of subsequent conflicts, such as the British-Argentinean war over the Falkland Islands in 1981 and the first and second wars in Iraq, where commercial war photography was strictly controlled and manipulated, it becomes very apparent that the Vietnam War was responsible for an unprecedented and probably unrealistic perception of how warfare could be visualized. It is estimated that at the height of the Vietnam War there were over 700 correspondents operating in the country. Accreditation as a correspondent was easy to come by (Knightly 442). In the case of photographers, it was made even easier by agencies such as the Associated Press, which “would lend virtually anyone a camera, complete with film, light meter, and brief instructions on its use, promise to pay a minimum of \$15 for any acceptable picture, and provide a letter to help the new man get his accreditation” (Knightly 461). Art Greenspon, who was to take one of the “defining images of the war” in April 1968,⁴³ describes how he had managed to get himself to Vietnam three months earlier: “I got \$600 for my Volkswagen Beetle, bought a one-way ticket to Saigon, got a 10-day tourist visa and set out to show the world ‘the truth’ about Vietnam” (van Agtmael n.p.).

In addition, accredited correspondents were given almost complete freedom of movement within the American theatre of war. Virtually the only restriction was

⁴³ The picture was captioned, “As fellow troopers aid wounded buddies, a paratrooper of A Company, 101st Airborne, guides a medical evacuation helicopter through the jungle foliage to pick up casualties during a five-day patrol of an area southwest of Hue, South Vietnam, April 1968.”

the photographer's own sense of danger and security. The result was that a particular vision of the Vietnam War – the commercial photojournalist's styled vision – predominated. It appears that a tradition of professional war photography that began with the coverage of the Spanish Civil War by Robert Capra, culminated in the Vietnam images of Art Greenspon, Larry Burroughs, Horst Faas, Eddie Adams, Nick Ut and others. So powerful was this imagery in visualizing and defining the American combat experience in Vietnam that a recently published collection of 300 images of the War from the archives of the Associated Press was able to describe itself, without any irony, as *Vietnam: The Real War*. *The New York Times* praised the collection in the following terms: "It was there, in the jungles, fields and French colonial cities that still photography became the great medium for telling the story of war" (Pyle n.pag.).

4. The Limited Photojournalism of the Border War

The censorship of all information about the Border War was to some degree inherent in the authoritarian culture of the South African government; but, I have argued, it was also consciously informed by the experience of Vietnam. South Africa's Border War took place in the shadows of the American denouement in Vietnam, and the government was acutely aware of the potential impact of photographs on the civilian population in South Africa. While all the studies of censorship and journalistic memoirs that concentrate on this period are concerned with the control of textual information, it was photographs that were most restricted. This was achieved primarily through the military's exclusion of photojournalists from the operational area. These restrictions were reinforced by prohibitions on reproducing any images that had not been sanctioned by the SADF. The assistant editor of the *Cape Times* during this period recalls the struggle and subterfuge that took place between the government and the opposition press:

As the news could not be published, the *Cape Times* sought to keep faith with its readers by other means. A fair amount of information could be got across indirectly and by implication in comment and analysis in

opinion columns and leading articles. But it was a tricky and at times a nerve-racking exercise. (Shaw 262-63)

While it may have been possible to hint at developments in this way, the textual subterfuge did not allow the use of photographs unless vetted by the SADF. By these means the military authorities were able to keep the visual reality of the war out of the purview of the South African public. Although the news of SADF deaths could not be kept from the South African media, the actual extent of the operations and images of dead or injured South Africans were rigorously excluded from the public view.

As I have described earlier, editors of South African media were controlled by “the ever-present threat of prosecution under the Defence Act if information of South African troop movements was disclosed” (Shaw 262). Not only was publication restricted, but access to the operational areas of northern Namibia was tightly controlled by the SADF. Movement in these areas was almost impossible without official permission to enter an area described by one South African newspaper editor as “a vast military zone, declared out of bounds to all visitors and covering an area of thousands of square miles. Any vehicle, any stranger, was easily spotted in these conditions” (Tyson 88). The one notable exception was the photojournalist John Liebenberg who, as a South African resident in South West Africa, used the cover of working as the circulation manager for the Windhoek independent newspaper *The Namibian* in order to move around the operational areas of the country with his camera. Patricia Hayes, who has collected Liebenberg’s photojournalism in a book entitled *Bush of Ghosts*, describes him as working in the Vietnam ethos (12). Liebenberg never enjoyed the freedom of the commercial photographers in Vietnam, who could make use of military transport and travel with their cameras to any part of the war that they wished. As a result, Liebenberg’s photographs of the war are largely glimpses captured when he was able to bring his camera out of hiding. His photographs do display a concern with contexts and victims that is an aspect of the best Vietnam war photography, but there is little in his work that is equivalent to the engaged photo essays of combat and its emotional

consequences that were so brilliantly executed by Larry Burrows and others in Vietnam. Liebenberg himself acknowledges this limitation:

My picture essays would have been completely different if I had access to Koevoet or SADF frontlines. You must remember that I only photographed from the side of the road. I was never in the bush. Yes, I went with church people to the aftermath but I couldn't go into the bush. Either side could have killed me. (Personal interview n.p.)

Even the limited photojournalism produced by John Liebenberg was not used by the mainstream press (either English or Afrikaans) during the war. Liebenberg's work was marketed by the small photographic news agency Afrapix, and his pictures were only purchased by the alternative press in South Africa to appear in the pages of *New Nation*, *Weekly Mail*, and *Vrye Weekblad*.

5. Vietnam Images as Screen Memories

The invisibility of the Border War contrasted strongly with the powerful visualization of the American involvement in the Vietnam War, which was almost bound to fill the 'cultural memory' of the South African war. Not only civilians were affected by the visual dominance of the Vietnam War, but combatants themselves found their memories influenced by these images. This was a visualization based not only on the still photographs from the conflict but also on the powerful cinematic representations of the Vietnam experience in films such as *Apocalypse Now*, *The Deer Hunter* and *Platoon*. Gary Baines has drawn attention to the manner in which the war in Vietnam has influenced many of the written accounts of the South African war. He claims that "the Vietnam War provided a framework for imagining the Border War" ("South Africa's Vietnam" 3), and that in the writing about the war, "the Border War might be remade in the image of America and remembered as 'South Africa's Vietnam'" ("South Africa's Vietnam" 17). I would suggest that the visual influence of the Vietnam War has had an even more dominating effect, in a South African culture with low levels of literacy, and particularly because of the relative invisibility of the Border War.

This can be seen clearly in the manner that the South African film director Darrell Roodt attempted to visualize the war in his film *The Stick*. Roodt, an artist strongly opposed to the apartheid regime, made his name with his first film *The Place of Weeping* (1986), which exposed the violence against black farm workers by white farmers in rural areas of South Africa. His approach towards the representation of the Border war was strongly pacifistic and opposed to the South African military presence in South West Africa/Namibia. Roodt's anti-war stance is made clearly evident in the opening scene of *The Stick*. As the camera tracks in towards the main character dressed in school uniform, he begins his voice-over narration with the words: "I remember my father once saying: 'The army will make a man out of you.' He was wrong."

When Roodt turned to visualizing the cross-border raids into Angola by the South African forces in *The Stick* in 1988, the director, who had no personal experience of the conflict, was forced to fall back on the clichés of Vietnam War films in order to represent the war. From superficial details like the men's jungle combat make-up and their olive green uniforms, to a narrative structure based on *Apocalypse Now*, *The Stick* is a Vietnam War film repackaged in an African setting. This is so apparent that the South African critic Martin Botha claims that "*The Stick* fits in the Vietnam War genre," and goes on to say that "Roodt's personal vision of the South African border war is one that is linked to the genre of American war films of the 1970s and 1980s, films praised for the critical examination of the psychological scars left on soldiers by the Vietnam War" (Botha n.pag.).

This example from cinematic representation suggests that it might be impossible to remember the South African Border War without drawing on the visual archive of the photographs and films from the Vietnam War. The notion of the Vietnam War operating as a 'screen memory' is apposite because, as Freud wrote:

Our childhood memories show us our earliest years not as they were but as they appeared at the later periods when the memories were aroused. In these periods of arousal, the childhood memories did not, as people are

accustomed to say, *emerge*; they were *formed* at that time. (322, Freud's emphasis)

Freud was trying to make sense of the disconnected and innocuous nature of early childhood memories. He was able to retrieve these memories, that seemed at odds with the evidence of intense childhood desires and fears, through an analysis of the adult unconscious. As Sturken points out, Freud's formulation draws attention to the way that memories are always formed in the present and carry the sediment of contemporary meanings and concerns (*Tangled Memories* 22). In the South African case, the dominating images of the Vietnam War act as a screen which obscures the original experience from view. Since the visual image plays a primary role in constructing a 'memory' of distant or traumatic events, the Vietnam image has filled the space created by the censorship of the Border War in South Africa.

6. The Internal Propaganda War

The move from a personal memory to the cultural memory of a remote and traumatic event such as a war is dependent on the production of memory objects. As we have seen, the primary examples of memory objects are public memorials or other forms of public commemoration; however, in South Africa this route is not available for the veterans of the Border War, so the turn to the photograph is particularly important. Here the veterans were to find themselves confronted by a war that had been rendered invisible to the South African public, but that had also been deliberately obscured by a range of media productions aimed at creating a palatable simulacrum of the war for the benefit of the public.

While the SADF controlled and restricted the photographic representation of the war in the South African media, this was accompanied by an internal propaganda campaign in which the SADF presented itself as a benign force to conscripts, recruits and the South African public. A feature of life in South Africa during the war years was a weekly radio programme called *Forces' Favourites*. Megan Morris writes that:

Growing up in Johannesburg during the 1970s my awareness of a place called 'the Border' came, to a degree, through the Saturday afternoon Springbok Radio request programme *Forces Favourites*. Dedicated to the 'boys on the border,' the programme conveyed messages between parents, wives and girlfriends at 'home' and their sons, spouses or boyfriends in the army. (158)⁴⁴

Throughout the war, the military itself produced a variety of publications that operated as pure propaganda about the various arms of the SADF. The flagship publication was *Paratus*, a monthly illustrated magazine produced by the military in Afrikaans and English editions which was issued to serving members of the SADF and sold to the public throughout the country by the Central News Agency (CNA). The equivalent for the South West African Territorial Force (SWATF) was *Pergamus*. Casper Erichsen, who has examined all these publications, concludes that they "contained depictions of romantic life in the army, medals and parades, military process and bloodless battles [. . .] not the 'reality' of the war" (182).

The official media in South Africa presented the war as a curious unreality. The 'boys' had to go to the border to join a struggle against communism/atheism/African nationalism; yet this struggle was never acknowledged as a war in all its blood-soaked violence. Military service was most commonly represented as a site of masculine passage, a necessary stage into manhood. This is most clearly illustrated by the Afrikaans feature film *Boetie Gaan Border Toe* (Little Brother Goes to the Border) in 1984. Directed by Regardt van den Bergh, with the support and involvement of the SADF, the film, in the form of a comedy, presents military service as a necessary rite of passage for white male South Africans. The central character, Boetie van Tonder, is the spoilt step-son of a powerful South African politician. In a cynical ploy to boost his step-father's political career, Boetie is bribed to leave university and do his military service. During training

⁴⁴ Gavin Younge, the original South African participant in the *Memorias Intimas Marcas* project, used "the signature tune and archival radio recordings" of *Forces' Favourites* in the soundtrack for his installation against amnesia which he exhibited at the Luanda, Cape Town, and Johannesburg exhibitions. The installation, entitled *Forces' Favourites*, consisted of a *laager* of Post Office delivery bicycles fitted with television screens showing footage that Younge had shot of the devastated landscape around Cuito Cuanavale. (Morris 164)

the spoilt brat learns to appreciate comrades from across the class divide and develops as a leader who comes into his own on the Border when their platoon corporal is wounded. The advertising for the film describes it with accuracy:

Boetie is die tipe ou wat alles sal doen om sy diensplig vry te spring, tot dat sy vader hom omkoop! Die storie van 'n seun wat ontwikkel in 'n man op wie sy land voorwaar kan trots wees. Vol humor, taaigheid, en 'n sekere soort teerheid wat nog lank onthou sal word. (*Boetie is the kind of guy who will do everything to avoid his national service, until his father bribes him to go. This is the story of a boy who develops into a man whom his country can indeed be proud of. Full of humour, toughness and a certain kind of tenderness that will be remembered for a long time.*)

The representation of the brief concluding Border War scene at the end of *Boetie gaan border toe* is strikingly without any context. The war is tacked on as the conclusion to the training which the young men have undergone in the main body of the film. The actual contact with the enemy is presented as a cacophony of explosions and flying bullets. The enemy, who are never identified (or even visible), function as a backdrop to the drama of masculinity which takes place in the foreground of the incident. After the shooting has stopped, Boetie rushes over to the Corporal Botha, their platoon commander, who has fallen during the skirmish, discovers that the man is only wounded and shouts out joyously to the rest of the platoon: “Korporaal is alright! Die korporaal is alright!” In the sequel to this film, *Boetie op maneuvres* (Little Brother on Manoeuvres) released in 1986, the war is completely erased. Military service has been reduced to comedic high jinx during training maneuvers safely inside South Africa.

7. The External Propaganda War

There is still debate over who won particular battles in the war⁴⁵ and on the outcome of the war itself, but even the most diehard defenders of the South African war effort freely acknowledge that the SADF lost the struggle to represent the war in the international media. Even General Geldenhuys, as we

⁴⁵ The military historian, Leopold Scholtz, reviewing in 2011 the fierce dispute over the outcome of the battle of Cuito Cuanavale (August 1977 – July 1988), writes: “this battle has become the focal point of the public debate about the question who actually won the war” (115).

have seen one of the most dogged advocates of the view that the SADF 'won' the Border War, has recognized this, stating emphatically that "[the] one war which we did lose was the propaganda war" (*At The Front* 144).

Geldenhuys claims that making propaganda was somehow below the SADF: "We regarded propaganda as a distasteful word and a concept without place in democratic politics" (145). The South African government did of course attempt to manipulate Western public opinion through trying to buy an American newspaper in the early 1970s and "other projects meant to improve the apartheid government's image" (du Preez 75). When the news of this covert campaign was revealed, it sparked a political scandal in South Africa, the so-called "Info Scandal" that led to John Vorster's demise as Prime Minister and his replacement by P.W. Botha.

By contrast, SWAPO's approach towards the use of photography in a propaganda war was to treat images as an aspect of the armed struggle. The South African government may have successfully suppressed the full extent of the war from its own electorate inside the country, yet an unintended consequence of this secrecy was that they lost control of the representation of the war outside the country.

The first SWAPO Secretary for Information, Andreas Shipanga, writes at some length in his autobiography about the first SWAPO disinformation campaign in the early 1970s, when PLAN was limited to operating out of Zambia into the Caprivi. Shipanga claims that he was able to use credulous Swedish photographers together with a village in Angola, which had been destroyed by the Portuguese, to effect this disinformation campaign. With the assistance of Dimo Hamaambo, the field commander of the SWAPO military wing, Shipanga claims that he fooled the Swedish team into believing that the Angolan village they were photographing was actually in South West Africa/Namibia⁴⁶. The Swedish footage – "reels and reels of film of skulls, skeletons, and gutted houses"

⁴⁶ The Swedish photographers may not have needed much "fooling". After the war, Sam Nujoma was to describe them as "embedded" in the ranks of SWAPO (Figueira et al 15).

– was presented at a press conference together with an old man claiming to be a survivor of the massacre. Shipanga recalls that “the journalists packed into the conference and the story of the Namibian village ‘wiped out by the Boers’ spread rapidly across the world” (96-97).

Although Shipanga was himself to fall out with the SWAPO political leadership before the end of the '70s, his influence was apparent in the most successful example of visual propaganda propagated in the Border War – the massacre at Cassinga. As we will see, in the absence of other images due to the lack of photojournalism during the war, these iconic images became especially important.

8. Three Iconic Images of the War

i. Cassinga-Kassinga grave

The most skilful and enduring external propaganda campaign of the entire war stemmed from the SADF raid on SWAPO's 'Moscow' base at Cassinga in Angola in 1978. To this day the controversy over the nature of the target and the actual battle continues to rage.⁴⁷ To a remarkable degree the controversy hinges on the reading of a small number of photographs.

The SADF claimed that the camp at Cassinga was SWAPO's main command and logistics headquarters controlling the insurgency into Namibia. On the 4th of May, 1978, the SADF sent an airborne force to attack the base at Cassinga in an audacious strike that it trumpeted as the most successful such operation since the Second World War. After a fierce battle lasting several hours, the SADF forces sacked the base and managed to withdraw by helicopter just before a Cuban armoured column counter-attacked from the neighbouring town of Techamutete. The SADF claimed to have killed a large number of SWAPO guerrillas, destroyed munitions stockpiles, and captured a significant store of documents. In several

⁴⁷ See Jan Breytenbach, *Eagle Strike* (2008); Annemarie Heywood, *The Cassinga Event* (1994); Mike McWilliams, *Battle for Cassinga: South Africa's Controversial Cross-Border Raid, Angola 1978* (2011); Edward George McGill Alexander, “The Cassinga Raid” (2003).

stage-managed press conferences, this was the account propagated within South Africa (Steenkamp, *Border Strike* 17-102).

Although the SADF planners recognized the need to produce photographs of the raid and its consequences, and seemed to have included a military photographer in the expedition for this purpose, it was the SWAPO position, illustrated with photographs of a mass grave, which seized international attention. Using these photographs SWAPO were able to present the operation to the rest of the world as “the brutal and unprovoked attack by the South African racist troops on the civilian settlement of Namibian refugees at Cassinga in southern Angola” (SWAPO spokesman, Peter Katjavivi, qtd. in Heywood 8). The photographs showing an open mass grave echoed the images of Nazi atrocities that had shocked the world into awareness of the Holocaust. Repeated in countless publications around the world the image became an iconic symbol of the brutality of the SADF forces in Namibia/Angola.

ii. The Trophy

If the photographs of the mass graves at Cassinga were the most enduring images of South African cross-border raids into Angola effectively deployed as propaganda by SWAPO, it was an amateur snapshot that created the most powerfully iconic image of the South African campaign inside Namibia itself. As discussed in Chapter One, Operation K or *Koevoet* was a South African Police special unit set up in 1979 to identify and hunt down suspected SWAPO guerrillas inside northern Namibia. The unit developed their fast moving tactics using the speed of their mine-protected vehicles (CASPIRs) to follow local trackers through the thick Owambo bush and engage with the guerrillas. The encounters, with Koevoet using heavy calibre weapons mounted on their vehicles together with helicopter support, were generally not in the guerrillas’ favour, even though Koevoet had some of the highest recorded casualties of any South African unit in the war. Koevoet had a practice of lashing the bodies of dead guerrillas onto the mudguards of their mine-protected vehicles in order to transport them back to SADF bases for identification and, it was widely believed,

to claim the bounty money that was the strong motivation for their activities (Stiff 488 – 489).

Gwen Lister, the editor of the pro-SWAPO newspaper, *The Namibian*, wrote how she and others were aware of this practice by Koevoet but were unable to get photographic evidence until a snapshot was taken by a Lutheran minister in the far north of the country. The image was reproduced in *The Namibian* and widely distributed internationally. To a greater degree than any other image from the war, variations of this photograph became *the* iconic image of the war in the eyes of the world.

iii. The 'Nine Days War' Mass Grave

The 'Nine Days War' was the last convulsive burst of violence in the Border war. Although a ceasefire had been declared by all sides involved in the conflict (SWAPO, the SADF, the Angolans and the Cubans) the PLAN forces chose to send several thousand armed soldiers over the South West African/Namibian border in violation of the ceasefire. The result was nine days of intense fighting (sometimes up to 30 battles a day!) in which the remobilized South West African forces, including elements of Koevoet, fought against large groups of PLAN soldiers trying to move into South West Africa/Namibia. Several hundred PLAN soldiers were killed for approximately 100 SADF deaths. The PLAN dead were unceremoniously buried in several mass graves around northern Ovamboland. One of the burial parties was photographed by John Liebenberg with an image that was powerful enough to inspire a play by Athol Fugard (*Playland*) and continues to resonate as a symbol of the brutality of the conflict.

So far from being an invisible war, internationally the conflict on the Namibian/Angolan border was in certain respects highly visible through the circulation of iconic images such as the Cassinga mass grave and the Koevoet trophy. What was absent were images of the experience of ordinary SADF conscripts, experiences which were not part of the official military propaganda and were also not encapsulated by the SWAPO propaganda of conspicuous brutality.

9. Soldiers' Snapshots

Sturken observes “camera images are a major factor in [the] traversing of memories between the realms of personal memory, cultural memory, and history” (“Absent Images” 690). This movement is clearly apparent in the changing shape of the pictorial archive of the Border war. What have begun to emerge in recent years are photographs taken by amateur photographers in the war, or as the first published collection of such images calls them, “Troepie Snapshots.”⁴⁸

Recent research in war photography has revealed several instances in which amateur photographs taken by soldiers have had great postwar significance. Of particular importance are the estimated millions of photographs taken during World War One by amateur soldier-photographers. Professional photographers/photojournalists were excluded from the war zone by the German military authorities because they were identified as a security risk. Amateur photographers were not seen as having access to the media or press reproduction and so were allowed to take photographs. So large was the market for cameras amongst German soldiers that camera companies developed smaller, light weight cameras for this purpose. These developments anticipated the creation of the first “range finder” 35mm cameras in the 1920s – leading to the creation of the Leica which would of course transform and even make possible modern photojournalism of war (Zelt 21).

Bodo von Dewitz has studied the political effect of these photographs in Germany in the years after the war, when “photographs taken by soldiers formed the historical basis without which the new slogans like [. . .] ‘unbeaten in the field’ would not have been effective” (153). Due to the limited number of official war photographers on the German side, these photographs by ordinary soldiers attracted “extraordinarily far-reaching interest” (154) among the German public and were featured in magazine publications, exhibitions, and books during the

⁴⁸ Cameron Blake, *Troepie Snapshots: Pictorial Recollections of the South African Border War* (2011).

war years. It was in the years after the war that the photographs gained an additional significance. Von Dewitz argues that the German media, particularly the new illustrated magazines, extensively reproduced the soldiers' photographs, which became "the building blocks for the rise of the National Socialist movement" (153).

A century later, in the recent conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, amateur photographs taken by soldiers have acquired a new significance. As Liam Kennedy points out: "This digital generation of soldiers exists in a new relationship to the experience of war. They are now potential witnesses and sources within the documentation of events, not just imaged actors" (480). This was most clearly the case when amateur snapshots of abuses by military police personnel in Abu Ghraib prison were released onto the internet and became the source of one of the greatest scandals ever to engulf the US Armed Forces.

The 'troepie snapshots' that are emerging into the South African discussion of the war reveal several important aspects of the lived experience of the conscript soldiers. Firstly, the very existence of these images is evidence of ill-discipline within the SADF. Photography, and even the possession of a camera, was strictly forbidden within the SADF. The taking of photographs was outlawed by Section 119 of the South African Defence Act of 1957, and soldiers were expressly informed that "any unauthorized use of cameras and other photographic equipment is forbidden" and that "any member in possession of a camera, who does not declare it, is guilty of an offence".

Cameron Blake, the editor of the first published collection of troepie snapshots, quotes a fairly typical response by a 'troep:'

I took many photos while on the Border and in Angola. You weren't supposed to take photos, but you didn't really give a damn. You just did it. Took a few with my little Instamatic, *nogal*. If you were bust with a camera you'd get in a lot of trouble. You weren't supposed to have them – but that was my challenge. (23)

Looking more closely at the images themselves, we can find evidence of how “these images trace the values and perspectives of the [. . .] soldier at war, not only in the overt content of the imagery but also in its compositions and generic frames and references” (Kennedy 481). In other words, we must engage with the mundane and amateurish qualities of such photography. Kennedy, who has applied this kind of analysis to the soldier photographs from the war in Iraq, finds three significant common elements in these images. All have resonances in South African ‘troepie snaps.’ Firstly, the use of the tourist frame represents “a strong sense of estrangement from the culture” and the repetition of the “imperial gaze.” This alienation from the people that the soldiers were supposed to be defending is constantly emphasized in the written accounts discussed in an earlier chapter of this study. The ‘troepie snapshots’ underline this primary alienation. Secondly, the images display the tendency to focus on life in the base or military camp. This also implies estrangement from local cultures but is, in addition, “a documentary representation of more private aspects of soldiers’ lives and their interpersonal relations, and of the way in which they domesticate certain spaces.” Here humour and playful performance are particularly prominent both in the American photographs and in the South African images. Thirdly, Kennedy draws our attention to the way that these photographs represent “the rituals of military and especially male military culture” (482). At the most obvious level the South African troepie snapshots serve to differentiate the experience of national servicemen from the two other groups who have been able to articulate their experience of the war: the generals and elite soldiers.

There is however a subset of soldiers’ snapshots that is barely represented in the Cameron Blake collection but which also has an inescapable significance. Tim Ramsden refers to the way that these images were distributed between soldiers in his conscript memoir *Border-Line Insanity*:

One night, as we relaxed, polishing our boots, JP pulled out some photos he had acquired from his cousin, who had [. . .] served in Angola in 1981 as part of *Operation Protea*. The pictures showed in graphic detail a few SWAPO guerrillas slumped over the spare tyre and rolled-up camo net on top of a Ratel. The blood of the dead enemy soldiers had run down the side of the vehicle, streaking it a thick red. Looking at the scene with a

twinge of fear in my gut, I had to wonder how we would fare if we were called into an operation. (73)

These images give glimpses of what Kennedy calls a “subcultural netherworld”(482) – the representation of violent war experience. In the soldiers’ photographs of the South African Border War and the American war in Iraq, amateur images of actual battle are rare and usually in long shot or out of focus. The images of the immediate aftermath of conflict, and the most difficult to view, include the ‘trophy images’ of enemy dead bodies.

Granger Korff, the South African parabat whose memoir of his experiences in the Border War was discussed in Chapter 2, describes two stages in the process of healing himself from the symptoms of war-induced PTSD. The first stage was the verbal sharing based on the procedures followed by the ‘store-front’ Vietnam veteran counselling centres. This leads Korff to write the memoir which enables him to return to South African and seek out his old comrades from the war. It is only at this point that he is able to engage with the atrocity/trophy photos that he has been carrying around for 18 years. He describes the process as cathartic:

I wept [. . .] when I burned the horrific close-up photographs of the dead SWAPO and FAPLA that I carried in my photo album [. . .] for 18 years. Some of the people in those pictures I had personally shot. I burned them in Los Angeles [. . .] . I dug a hole in the backyard and buried the ashes there. As I did so, I felt a burden lift instantly from my shoulders. (340)

10. Conclusion

For Korff, there is a sense that the destruction of his ‘trophy photos’ is a final release from the demons of his war experiences that he interpreted as PTSD. Yet, as Kali Tal has emphasized, the public role that amateur photos can play in the postwar solution for SADF veterans does not lie in destroying their trophy photos and displaying only their ‘troepie snaps.’ The amateur or ‘troepie’ photographs are potentially the catalyst for the process of narrating the private experiences of the war, the ‘tales of the ordinary’ which are the necessary stuff of recovering the individual contours of the war experience. The abject trophy

images, where they do exist, are an inescapable reminder of the dark side of this war, and a reminder that war is ultimately about taking life and inflicting serious injury in order to destroy 'the enemy.' As any number of war memoirs and novels would attest, it is an aspect of war that is never ultimately integrated into life in peacetime. Making such photographs public would therefore help to recall the seriousness of war and the need to pursue peace. So I conclude by returning to Trachtenberg: "The real war lies in our efforts to win images away from the clutch of historicizing ideologies, to recover a connected history." Such efforts can only be assisted by images that "disclose the most immediate and least comprehensible of war's facts, that it is waged on tangible human flesh and inscribed in pain" (118). As I have argued, using Azoulay's theory, depictions of unacceptable violence offer an important opportunity for a moral negotiation among the photographer, the photograph, the victim and the viewer. The complex and layered appropriation of this negotiation in the BOS exhibition offers an artistic reflection on the process.

CHAPTER 6

THE ARTISTIC PROCESS

1. Introduction

In this section I will give an account of the artistic process that led to the BOS exhibition. This is not in any way presented as an interpretation of the work or as an authoritative explanation of authorial intention. In fact, the form of the final works, and the sequence of display chosen for the exhibitions of the project, are as much the result of many chance events and inarticulate hunches that developed from my engagement with the subject matter and my creative collaborators as they are a direct consequence of artistic strategies formulated in advance. The strategies that I followed can be summed up as appropriation, miniaturization, and re-presentation/re-staging. How these strategies emerged during the process, came into focus, and were modified, is described in this chapter.

2. Small Worlds and the Power of the Miniature

The BOS exhibition project grew from my experience of a previous art project where I first encountered the strangely compelling power of miniatures or scale models in relation to my own artistic activity. I set out to find railway modellers who had created miniature worlds around the memory of the South African railway system. Railway modellers form a somewhat reclusive sub-culture and emerge publicly at hobby fairs or expositions to show their work. After using such public events as an opportunity to make contact with local modellers, I discovered that the modellers who worked with South African scenes are a tiny subset of the subculture. The reason for this is that the majority of modellers work with the rolling stock and landscape pieces which are readily available through commercial dealers. As scale models of South African Railways rolling stock and South African flora are not produced commercially, modellers wanting

to recreate South African scenes have to be particularly determined. They have to be prepared to modify from available materials, or fabricate from scratch, the rolling stock and the surroundings – the landscape features and flora – necessary for the creation of South African scenes.

It took about a year to track down the modellers who have this determination, or obsession, about recreating their memories of the South African railways. In the time that it took me to win their trust enough to photograph their creations, I also became fascinated with notions of miniaturization and play and the incentives of these modellers. There is a slightly defensive air about railway modellers. Despite the seriousness of their engagement (some of the men I encountered had spent millions of rands on their creations, and all had invested enormous amounts of time on them), the activity still has associations with childishness.

As a child I shared this fascination with scale models, playing with a model railway set and constructing plastic miniatures of aeroplanes and armoured vehicles from World War II; but it took an encounter with an Israeli animated film to make me aware of the connection between constructed models and my own questions concerning the memory of the Border War.

3. *Waltz with Bashir*: Animating Memory and Trauma

At about the time I was wrapping up the *Small Worlds* exhibition, I had a particularly powerful encounter with the 2008 Israeli film *Waltz with Bashir*, written and directed by Ari Folman. The film caught my attention for a number of reasons. Folman was a veteran of the 1982 Lebanon War, a conflict that for me has many echoes of the South African incursions into Angola in the 1980s.⁴⁹ Since his involvement in the war as an Israeli Defence Force conscript, Folman seems to have suffered from amnesia about his experiences. *Waltz with Bashir* documents his attempt to regain his lost memories of the conflict through

⁴⁹ See Ahron Bregman, *Israel's Wars: A History Since 1947*, and Ze'ev Schiff and Ehud Ya'ari, *Israel's Lebanon War*.

interviews with the men who served with him in Lebanon. What is really striking about his approach to the subject is that Folman uses the technique of animation to recreate the memories of his interview subjects. Folman in fact tracked down his old comrades from the war and interviewed them about their memories of the conflict. These interviews were then used as an audio track to which he added animated interpretations of their verbal accounts, moving freely between actuality/memory, dream, and even fantasy. Through this technique Folman creates a powerful and multi-faceted account of the experience of the war in Lebanon through the eyes of the teenage Israeli combatants. In the process he uncovers his own suppressed memories of the conflict. The truth of his experience is that he was stationed on the outskirts of the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps when, in September 1982, Lebanese Christian phalange militia carried out the massacres of Palestinian refugees, which made the war so notorious. His tangential involvement in the massacre is only revealed at the end of the film and is done through a grimly telling dissolve from animation into the actual documentary footage of the consequences of the massacre.

Waltz with Bashir was an important and liberating experience for me. It engaged with the problem of memories of war, and of the representation of such memories, particularly those tainted with trauma and guilt. Folman's bold use of animation as a mode of representation also made me realize that an exploration of memories of the Border War did not have to be limited to realist modes; it could explore other modes such as animation, and even constructions and miniatures. Folman's work also suggested to me that alternative modes of representation could critique or even interrogate our reliance on realist modes, most notably the war photograph. One of the most telling scenes in *Waltz with Bashir* is when one of Folman's informants, a teenage conscript who is now a clinical psychologist, discusses the problematic relationship between photographs and memory. He refers specifically to a study⁵⁰ which examined the effect of doctored photographs on memory. In this study, subjects were

⁵⁰ Kimberley Wade et al, "A picture is worth a thousand lies: using false photographs to create false childhood memories", *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review* 9(3) 2002: 597-603.

presented with photographs showing them participating in childhood events such as birthdays and family outings. Unknown to the subjects, one of the photographs in the sequence was a digitally manipulated photograph showing a completely false childhood experience of the subject riding in a hot air balloon. The experiment revealed that 50% of the research subjects fabricated memories in response to the doctored image of the balloon ride. What is particularly striking about this result is that the percentage of subjects who fabricated memories in response to the faked photograph was significantly higher than the percentage of subjects who fabricated memories in previous experiments when tested with faked narratives. The authors of the study ascribe the enhanced effect of photographs to the greater amount of perceptual detail available in the photographic image (Wade et al. 602-3).

Folman's work with *Waltz with Bashir* was liberating for my own thinking about memory and war. The observation about fabricated memories was the particular catalyst for my struggle with the significance of the photographic record of the Border War.

4. Contemporary Art and Trauma

While *Waltz with Bashir* was liberating at the level of practice, Susan Bennett's work was a vital catalyst for thinking this project through contemporary art theory. In her path breaking study entitled *Emphathic Vision: Affect, Trauma and Contemporary Art*, Bennett draws on her experience as a curator and critic to challenge the two major approaches which have dominated the representation of traumatic memory in contemporary visual art.

The first approach towards such representations is derived from trauma studies and insists that the work be the direct communication of the traumatic experience or an expression of a reaction to the traumatic event. In Bennet's view this approach privileges the 'ownership' of the traumatic experience and tends to result in art that either seeks to replicate the original experience in the viewer through a tactic of shock or 'secondary traumatisisation'. This approach, based on a fundamentally realist aesthetic, most often results in various forms of

mimicry by artists seeking to communicate the trauma. The second approach, which Bennett associates with Hal Foster and a theoretical “return to the real” treats trauma as a trope within the discourse of contemporary art. This approach aestheticizes an actual condition in the world with the risk of providing the illusion of redemption by art (3-5).

In contrast to these positions, Bennett argues for the importance of a non-realist form of art that respects the force or impact of traumatic experience but that seeks to manage the impact of this experience within the artwork. In her view such works are relational and transactive rather than directly communicative (7). Her theoretical work seeks to provide “a framework that challenges the nexus between art and experience and a *realist* aesthetics: a framework that distinguishes the kind of inquiry that art might instantiate from the idea that art is a vehicle for the interpersonal transmission of experience” (her emphasis 5-6). Bennett provides close analyses of a number of works that function in this manner. Significantly for this study, these works include productions by artists responding to post colonial conflict situations in Northern Ireland, Columbia and South Africa.

A further point of resonance with my own conceptualization is Bennett’s use of a reading of empathy. As Bennett recognizes, her approach is, in a strong degree, informed by a hostility towards what she calls, following Brecht, “crude empathy”(10). Yet, the sophistication of her approach is that she realizes that empathy, the human connection between suffering and the external observer cannot be dispensed with when engaging imaginatively with trauma. The solution that she recognizes in the transactive nature of the works in her case studies, is a form of empathy closely related to Dominic LaCapra’s notion of “empathic unsettlement”(8). LaCapra writes that “being responsive to the traumatic experience of others, notably of victims, implies not the appropriation of their experience but what I would call empathic unsettlement” (*Writing History, Writing Trauma* 41). Empathy, in his view, is essential for a humane engagement with traumatic events and victims; but a degree of unsettlement is necessary to prevent the historian becoming a “surrogate victim” through the

process of identification. Empathic unsettlement involves “a kind of virtual experience through which one puts oneself in the other’s position while recognizing the difference of that position and hence not taking the other’s place” (*Writing History, Writing Trauma* 78).

While LaCapra’s formulation is close to her own, Bennett recognizes that this formulation derives from his work as a historian and historiographer, in particular his interventions into the debates around the relationship between historical discourse and the testimonies of victims of trauma such as the Holocaust. Hence Bennett’s emphasis on “empathic vision”, in other words an exploration of traumatic experience and memory through “the affective dynamics of the artwork” (47).

Bennett explores these notion through a reading of a number of works, including Gavin Young’s installation, *Forces’ Favourites* (1997), Jo Ractliffe’s series of photographs, *At the End of the Day* (1994), and Jane Taylor and William Kentridge’s stage production, *Ubu and the Truth Commission* (1997). However the example that was most relevant to my thinking about creative practice was her insightful analysis of the 1993 installation *To Kill An Impulse* by the Belfast artist, Sandra Johnson.

Bennett shows how Johnson’s work engages with the media representation of grief and suffering in Northern Ireland. Johnson’s installation consisted of two streams of slide footage projected from opposite walls onto a single sheet of glass in the middle of the gallery. One stream consisted of images culled from the media coverage of political funerals in Northern Ireland. The other stream showed images from a performance piece done by the artist in a Belfast skip. In this piece, Johnson acted out the grief that she felt at the murder of a female activist whose body had been dumped in a skip. What was striking about this work was Johnson’s use of two intertwined streams of images in which, as Bennett observes:

By juxtaposing her body image with the funeral imagery, Johnson does not simply enact her own sense memory of trauma but opens up a critical reading of the media imagery of funerals. [. . .] Johnson is not, however,

merely 'rectifying' a perceived failing in her audience, directing us to feel in a particular way. In fact, the juxtaposition and intertwining of two accounts of grief serve to fracture and multiply embodied viewpoints. (56)

Bennett recognizes that Johnson's selection of funeral images - using a still camera with a motor drive to capture particular images from recordings of television footage - is based on the artist's very personal response to particular moments. Following the artist, this process is linked to Barthes' notion of the *punctum*; but in general her study does not engage with the peculiarly complex relationship that photographs have with memory and with traumatic memory in particular. So her influence was liberating at the theoretical level; but did not provide specific pointers towards my own practice in the *BOS* creative process.

5. The Modeling Process

My first thought was to use miniatures of military technology in a manner analogous to my work with SAR scenes in the *Small Worlds* project. I thought this might be possible through tracking down those military modellers, the hobbyists, who built scale versions of SADF equipment from the Bush War period. However, I discovered that the subculture of such modellers was an even smaller subset of military modellers than the SAR aficionados of railway modellers. In addition, the few that I tracked down did not do accurate enough work for my requirements, nor did they (unlike railway modellers) create imagined worlds around their constructions.

Another aspect of military models is that the army made extensive use of models as a means of communicating strategy to various levels of combatants. At the highest level, senior officers employed complicated paper-maché models of the landscape with realistic scenery such as the example below, where General Viljoen, then chief of the SADF, can be seen demonstrating a tactical point to his staff using a detailed model with buildings, rivers, vehicles, and flora. These tactics were conveyed through the various levels of command down to the

platoon commanders who would use crude sand models to convey instructions to the members of their squads.



[From Heitman, Helmoed-Romer, *South African War Machine* (1985)]

Miniatures, in the military context, therefore do not just connote childishness , play or nostalgia⁵¹; but represent a form of tactical thinking and as this memory of the Cassinga operation suggests, a form of reassurance. One of the participants, Rifleman Neil Fenton, remembered that:

[they] knew they were going to Cassinga as they had a thorough briefing at the order group. They had been taken to a small house and in one of the rooms there was a huge paper-maché model of the town with little plastic men and vehicles. The model was extremely well constructed [. . .] As he walked to the aircraft the picture of the model remained with him. He believed that they would be OK. (Paul 50-51)

⁵¹ See the very forceful disparagement of miniatures by Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (2007).

I realized that I might have to make the constructions myself, and began to investigate the archives of photographs from the war. It was then that I became aware of the ambiguous role of photography in the Namibian conflict. I had always known about the censorship of information about the war at the time, but I recalled an incident from my own experience of the war. This memory crystalized for me the tensions and ambivalences over photography in general and war photography in particular that I had been feeling.

The incident occurred during an operation in southern Angola. A sergeant in my unit accidentally stepped on a booby trap and was badly injured. We had to drag the wounded man on an improvised stretcher to a point where he could be reached by helicopter for casualty evacuation. In the heat of the incident, and not thinking about any consequences, we simply bundled the man's kit along with him into the helicopter. In his kit was his small instamatic camera with which he had taken some snaps of us on the operation. Any sort of camera was strictly prohibited by the military. I heard later that he had been charged for the illegal possession of the camera and placed under arrest while he was recovering in the intensive care unit at the military hospital. I never heard what happened to him, or what sentence he received once he had recovered sufficiently to stand trial. The memory of the incident, however, came back to me with great intensity as I began to conceptualize the project.

At about the same time, I came across a book by the American photographer of miniatures, David Levinthal. Levinthal's work, which I have discussed at length in an earlier chapter, has always intrigued me. However my encounter with his first works in the book, *Hitler Moves East*, was powerfully inspirational. In this book, Levinthal uses photographs of miniature battle scenes to explore the visual representation of the German invasion of Russia, the so-called Operation Barbarossa in 1941. What was striking for me was not only Levinthal's use of miniatures for his recreations, but also – and more importantly for my project –

the fact that his work was based on the absence of real photographs. At the time when Levinthal was creating and photographing his constructed scenes from the Russian front, there were very few photographs available in the USA from that period of the war. Levinthal's constructed images both visualize the conflict and present a critique of the conventions of war photography of the time, in particular the grainy 35mm film and hasty compositions that were employed by Capra and his imitators. This approach is most clearly apparent in the image below, which clearly references Capra's most famous photograph, *Loyalist Militiaman at the Moment of Death*, taken during the Spanish Civil War in 1936. The ironic complexity of Levinthal's image is undergirded by a questioning of the original photograph's authenticity. Far from itself being an unproblematic documentary record of the moment of a soldier's death, the Capra photograph is now believed to be itself a construction or an enactment for the benefit of the camera.⁵²



[David Levinthal, image from *Hitler Moves East*.]

⁵² Phillip Knightly reviews all the evidence in his study *The First Casualty: From the Crimea to Vietnam; The War Correspondent as Hero, Propagandist, and Myth Maker* (1974). His carefully considered opinion was that “[Capa] faked the most famous war photograph of all time, the Spanish soldier at the moment of death” (“Capa’s greatest creation” n.pag.).

6. Archival Research

It was at this point, with these influences on my mind, that I began the initial archival research for the project. I began by working through various newspaper archives – *The Rand Daily Mail*, *Sunday Times* and *Weekly Mail* – to substantiate my sense that very few photographs of the war appeared in the South African media at the time of the conflict. My investigations confirmed this perception; moreover, in the process I discovered that there were certain images which resonated with some of my personal experiences of the war, but in a strangely remote and distanced way. I was struck by the yawning gap between these images and their generally bland captions, and the intensity of the actual experiences that came back to me. How could the South African public have come to know anything about the war through these particular photographs?

At the same time, I also conducted research into the photographic archive of the SADF itself. Unlike the newspaper archives, which are generally well organized, the SADF photo archive is in a state of disorder. Photographs are stuffed into folders without any apparent attempt at classification. Images from the Korean or the Second World War are jammed together with photographs from the Border War. Other images, scanned from negatives, are stored in equally disorganized digital folders on the archivist's computer. Despite the chaos, the overall sense that one gets from the SADF archive is that it constitutes a depressing chronicle of dead PLAN combatants. Presumably taken for forensic or intelligence purposes, this vast accumulation of images of dead bodies records, with dispassionate obscenity, the effect of powerful modern weaponry on the human body.



[Official SADF photographic team documenting dead PLAN combatants.
SADF archive, Pretoria]

Susan Sontag is credited with questioning the effect of violent photographs on the viewing public. While I have differences with her argument (these are outlined in an earlier chapter), her critique confirmed me in my determination not simply to reproduce the obscenity of these photographs of death and physical suffering in the Border War.

7. Meeting John Liebenberg

The second significant encounter at this early stage of the project was with the photographer John Liebenberg. In my archival research into the news coverage of the war, I had become vaguely aware of John's by-line and the frequent coincidence between particularly affecting images and his work as a photographer. A chance referral led to an introduction and an invitation by the photographer to help him edit the photographs that were to appear in the book *Bush of Ghosts*, which John was in the process of publishing together with the visual historian Patricia Hayes. I soon realized that John was the pre-eminent photographer of

the Border War. As the photographer working for the only independent newspaper in Namibia (then South West Africa), *The Namibian*, John Liebenberg covered the war with a thoroughness and freedom which was not possible for South African photographers. Liebenberg has never received the recognition granted to his contemporaries such as Kevin Carter, Ken Oosterbroek, Greg Marinovich and Joao Silver (the members of the so called 'Bang-Bang Club' of conflict photographers in South Africa.) Perhaps this was because he was based in Namibia; perhaps it was also because he covered a largely invisible and unpublicized war, whereas his contemporaries in South Africa rode the wave of international publicity that erupted in the last years of apartheid. Hearing from him the circumstances in which many of the photographs were taken, opened them up to me beyond my personal, psycho-historical musings.

One photograph by John Liebenberg was a catalyst for the form taken by the final version of the project. Originally published in *The Namibian* but encountered by me in the pages of the *Weekly Mail*, the photo showed a picnic on the banks of the Cunene River. The picnickers are a group from the much-feared police unit, Koevoet, together with their wives and families. In the background of the photograph is their iconic armoured vehicle, the Casspir.



The absolute banality of the scene – a braai on the sandy bank of a river, fat men with ‘beer-boeps’ and their ungainly wives sunning themselves on the dreaded Casspir, the children playing amongst ammunition cases and picnic baskets – triggered an important aspect of the project in my mind. Not only did I want to recreate and photograph the scene in the photograph – in other words, *appropriate* an existing photograph in order to create a second order of questioning around the meaning of the image. I also wanted to use the recreation, the model, as a portal into an exploration of the *scene*, the actual circumstances behind the photograph. The constructed scene would allow the realization of various framing possibilities that were inherent in the scene. This follows from my engagement with the German philosopher of photography Vilem Flusser and his notion of the camera as an “apparatus,” in other words a device which contains preprogrammed possibilities of vision. As he writes in his *Philosophy of Photography*:

The photographer moves within specific categories of space and time regarding the scene: proximity and distance, bird- and worm’s-eye views, frontal- and side-views, short or long exposures, etc. The Gestalt of space-time surrounding the scene is prefigured for the photographer by the categories of his camera. These categories are an a priori for him. He must ‘decide’ within them: he must press the trigger. (198)

What John Liebenberg told me about the circumstances of taking the photograph established that this was, in fact, a very difficult shot. The Koevoet men noticed him approaching their party with his camera and confronted him. Fearing that he would lose his camera and the precious film, John pretended to be an ornithologist studying the bird life in the river area. The Koevoet group were not completely convinced, but the ruse was sufficient for John to make his escape from the area with the photograph.

Liebenberg was very happy to give me the rights to his photograph, both from his generous nature and, I think, because he was intrigued by my project. Analyzing the photograph, it became more apparent to me what I wanted to achieve with the models and also that I could not use amateur modellers for this

work. Not only was there simply too much work for an amateur to fabricate the number of scenes that I had in mind, the detail and realism that I was going to require from the models was also beyond the capability of any of the amateur work that I had encountered.

8. Taking the Models Further

Once again, I returned to the SA War Museum, where the amateur modellers and the military re-enactors have their monthly meetings. One of the museum staff, another key figure in the project who linked me to several important contacts, showed me work done in the Museum by a professional modeler. The model was of a giant German artillery piece from the First World War housed in a glass-topped display case. The finish and attention to detail was exactly what I was looking for in my models, but my eye was caught by a particular feature – a figure of a miniature dog handler with his animal on a leash standing before the gargantuan weapon. That extra, idiosyncratic detail was what clinched it for me. Tracking down the modeler to his studio wasn't difficult and it was there that I discovered that although his passion was for military scenes, his day to day work involved building miniature sets for the film and advertising industry. When I first visited him, he and his team were creating miniature statues of Charles Glass, the historic South African Breweries brewer of Castle Lager, for an advertising agency.

Unfortunately, the miniature SADF vehicles that I needed for the scenes I had envisaged were outside of his capacity to build from scratch. For such vehicles, I had to engage with another subculture in the world of miniatures – the professional military modellers who make scale models for arms manufacturers, notably the Centurion-based conglomerate Denel. The craftsman that I tracked down was also intrigued by the project and it didn't take much persuading to get him to commit to fabricating the vehicles, in 1/35th scale, that I needed for the scenes. He built me a Ratel 90, a Withings armoured transport vehicle and a Buffel; and assembled and modified a Casspir APC that I obtained from a Cape Town craftsman.

9. Studio Photography and Thomas Demand

Finally, I realized that I needed properly controlled studio photography to achieve the look that I wanted from the images. In this, I was strongly influenced by the work of the German photographer Thomas Demand, an artist who has worked with recreations of news photographs that have a particular resonance for his understanding of German history. His approach towards these photographs is to recreate the scene in the form of a life-size paper and cardboard sculpture, which is then photographed with a sense of unnatural clarity and detachment.⁵³



[The German newsmagazine cover story of the German politician, Uwe Barschel's mysterious death in a Geneva hotel room in 1987.]

⁵³ See Charlotte Cotton, *The Photograph as Contemporary Art* (2004); Thomas Demand, *Thomas Demand, Nationalgalerie Berlin* (2009).



[Thomas Demand's "appropriation" of the *Stern* cover photograph in his 1997 work, "Bathroom (Badezimmer)". Note the slight alteration of camera angle and the addition of the rumpled bathroom mat.]

Looking for a local studio with the facilities to photograph miniatures I was referred to Mike Lewis, who would also become a significant collaborator in the project. Lewis, a successful advertising photographer and a man of my own age, was also marked by the Border War. In his case, he had managed to avoid military service by leaving the country and marrying a foreign girl. It was an act with unfortunate consequences for him. The marriage turned out to be desperately unhappy – and managing the emotional and financial consequences of the failed relationship had overshadowed most of the next fifteen years of his life. Although he had no direct experience of the northern Namibian border, Mike immediately grasped the effect of the light on white sand that I was seeking to achieve and was able to replicate this in his studio lighting of the models.

10. The Shooting Process

The next stage of the project involved briefing and directing my team of collaborators. After a series of one-on-one planning meetings, I needed the team

to work remotely from each other but to stay in touch with each other's progress. For this purpose, I put up a blog with copies of the photographs that I wished to reconstruct, together with reference images and instructions for the 'look and feel' that I hoped to achieve with the models and imaging of the scenes. To this blog I added visual and textual updates on the progress of the various processes up until the final days of studio photography (see www.doherty.co.za/bushwars).

Although "Koevoet Picnic" was the catalyst for my thinking about the way to approach the constructed scenes, the actual shooting process was determined by the rate of completion of the models and the availability of the studio.

The first sequence to be photographed was the "Civilian Incident" series. Beginning with this series was also an advantage because I envisaged this as the most cinematic arrangement of shots with the classic filmic sequence of wide, middle, and close-up shots providing a temporal scan of the scene. The constructed scene was based on a number of different photographs which I had sourced from the newspaper coverage of the time and which, together, suggested two dominating themes. First, the intrusion or contrast between the SADF's technology (in the form of the Buffel armoured troop carrier) and the technological development of the local people in the border area (in the form of the donkey cart); and second, the ambiguity of events, the impossibility of knowing, even at the time, what the truth was of anything in the operational area. The scene shows the immediate consequences of an explosive blast which killed a local woman in the vicinity of an Ovambo traditional homestead. Her mutilated body lies in the foreground of the scene and appears in all but one of the photographs in the final sequence. Behind her is the SADF vehicle with the models of three soldiers standing up to survey the scene. Two seem to be looking down towards the scene of the explosion, but the other, shading his eyes with his hand, is peering towards a donkey cart that is hurriedly exiting the site of the explosion. The mutilated corpse of the Ovambo woman is deliberately presented in a 'splatter-horror' manner with quantities of garishly red blood on her body and her leg – blown off by the force of the explosion – lying next to her on the blood soaked sand. Was the woman a victim of a landmine laid by PLAN

insurgents? Or was she killed by an SADF mortar shell? In the memorable phrase employed by the Americans in their twentieth-century wars, is she 'collateral damage'?

The next sequence to be photographed was the "Koevoet Picnic." This was more of a challenge because the shot required an image of the Cunene River to be composited in the background of the studio image. The final version of the "background place" was actually taken from an image of the Vaal River which, of all the local watercourses, had the closest resemblance to the Namibian border river. The arrangement of the figures was to be done by the military modeler Tony Collins. At this point it became apparent how the figurines, sourced from a German scale model railway supplier, were changing the meaning of the scene. Instead of the overweight wives and girlfriends of the original photograph by John Liebenberg, the models had a svelte elegance which emphasized the incongruity of the event on the edge of the border that was generally so difficult to define. This was also shot as a sequence with an establishing wide shot (based on the original photograph) followed by a series of close-ups that isolated interactions between the men and women in the scene.

This was followed by the photography of the Cassinga-Kassinga scene. As the hyphenated title suggests, this is one of the pivotal events in the War but also one which has two seemingly irreconcilable interpretations. For the SADF participants in the event it was a glorious and successful airborne assault on a major SWAPO base in Angola. The result of the surprise attack, in this view, was to put SWAPO on the defensive and disrupt their operational capability for the early 1980s. By contrast, SWAPO presented the attack as a massacre perpetrated on an unprepared refugee camp which left hundreds of civilians dead, including women and children. The constructed scene, however, is based on one of the few photographs produced by the South Africans involved in the attack. This image was taken by the photographer who accompanied the South African forces on the attack. The photograph shows one of the Russian-made anti-aircraft guns which was dug into the fortifications of the base. Two versions of the scene were

photographed, one in desolate dust and the other with crudely home-made pyrotechnics showing the area in flames and trees burning like torches.

The next scenes to be photographed involved the Ratel armoured fighting vehicle. The first, based on a photograph from the last phase of the war, shows a Ratel crossing a bridge in Angola with a dead enemy (he could be SWAPO or FAPLA) lying on the bridge. One of the SADF crew is seated at the back of the Ratel and stares back at the body lying on the bridge, while the other two crew members, who are sitting in the turret of the vehicle, are focused on the forward movement of the Ratel and seemingly oblivious to the corpse lying behind them.

The following sequence, making use of the same Ratel model, required a scene from the showgrounds. These scenes were a common feature of public exhibitions and agricultural shows throughout the period of the war. However, I wanted the scene to be clearly identified as the Rand Show and used a composited photograph of the distinctive Johannesburg skyline as the background for the image.

The penultimate shots required the Casspir with a dead body mounted on the mudguard. Erichsen argues, I think correctly, that this was the defining image of the war and one that heavily affected the SADF's claims about the war (180). Although initially denied by SADF official spokesmen, the practice of bringing back bodies in this way was standard practice amongst Koevoet units.

Finally, and perhaps the most difficult to shoot, was the mass grave sequence. Once again the establishing wide shot was based on a photograph taken by John Liebenberg. As discussed in Chapter 5, the photograph refers to another of the events of the war that has strongly contested interpretations. At the very end of the war on 1st April 1989, during the preparations for the UN-administered elections, a large group of PLAN soldiers attempted to cross the border with their weapons. According to SWAPO and its sympathizers the troops were planning to hand in their weapons to the UN forces. However, according to the UN at the time, and also the SADF, the incursion was a violation of the terms of

the peace agreement and was a SWAPO attempt to gain some legitimacy as having a military presence in Namibia before the elections. The opening shot in the sequence was closely modeled on Liebenberg's photograph, with one significant modification. The naked body of the dead PLAN combatant was deliberately made bigger than the figures of the soldiers, thus exaggerating the Christ-like effect of the image.

The rest of the shots showed a close-up of the bodies and then, from a viewpoint directly above the mass grave, to create a sense of claustrophobia and disgust, the bodies spread-eagled in the soft sand of the mass grave.

11. The Human Subjects : Conscription as Re-Enactment

The scale models worked to create a sense of detachment and alienation – asking the spectators to consider how they thought they could know anything about the events represented in the original photographs. However, it was that very detachment that I wished to challenge with a contrasting series of images. Here, I imagined a series of life-size (or even larger than life size) human portraits, arranged amongst the constructed photographs of the scale models, and staring directly at the spectator, in a manner that would be confrontational and yet stylized. The portraits would forcefully introduce the human gaze into the relationship between the viewer and the memory of the Bush War. These portraits had to be of conscripts in battle dress, but they needed to be posed by young men from the present, men the age of conscripts as they were then, young men who would be involved in a war if there was one happening in the present.

I recruited my subjects by word of mouth, auditioning them individually in my office, taking test shots and telling them about the project. It turned out that all the boys who applied for the shoot had some kind of personal link with the War. For most of them this was through having fathers or older male relatives who had been involved in it. All reported that they had never received a coherent account of those experiences from their older relatives. In the end I chose six for the actual shoot, and selected five of them for the exhibition.

For their uniforms, I once again returned to the SA War Museum in the hope of renting from their stock. I found the rental process at the Museum impossibly slow so instead I tracked down a company that specializes in renting military equipment and weapons to the film industry.

The portraits of the boys represent the ambivalence of the present, and the role of young men and masculine identity in the military process, but I still needed to add an aspect of alienation/detachment into the portraits. It was at this point that I introduced combat make-up into the process of creating the portraits.

One of the ironies of the Bush War was the heavy reliance by the SADF on black soldiers. The use of black combat make-up was directly related to this reliance. The *skerp punt* (sharp end) of the SADF's military capability in the north was based on the black light infantry units of 32, 31 and 101 Battalions, together with the police special unit Koevoet. This was, of course, nothing new in the history of the military in Southern Africa, but nonetheless a particularly striking fact in an army that was supposedly upholding apartheid. The black units fulfilled several purposes for the SADF in South West Africa/Namibia. The soldiers in these units were recruited from the areas (Owamboland, southern Angola) where they were operational and they benefited from their knowledge of the local languages and environment. Black soldiers were also based permanently in the operational area – in the case of the infantry units, on a six weeks in operations, four weeks out of operations basis – and became highly experienced bush fighters able to sustain themselves in the harsh conditions of the frontier region. Finally, and perhaps most important politically, the casualties sustained by these units did not get reported in the South African media. The deaths of white conscripts could not be kept out of the South African papers; but in the Namibian conflict, which like Vietnam was a media war where success was based on “kill-ratios,” the underreporting of the total SADF casualty rate was a distinct advantage.

White soldiers who fought alongside these black soldiers, either as officers or non-commissioned officers, or in front-line units such as the Parabats, had to

use combat make-up to disguise themselves as black. The thick greasy substance, liberally applied to face, neck, and upper arms was known colloquially by the English phrase “Black is Beautiful.”



[White soldiers in “Black is Beautiful” combat make-up, 32 Battalion, southern Angola. From: Steenkamp, Willem, *South Africa’s Border War 1966-1989*.]

For me, a lot turned on this phrase. The use of this make-up – in which young white men applied ‘black face,’ not in a spirit of irony or racist mockery (as in American “black face”) but as a necessity for survival – was an important and challenging aspect of the exhibition’s meaning. Nevertheless, the use of “black face” in any contemporary representation has uncomfortable resonances with the debates over ethnic identity and ‘political correctness.’ Presenting this series of images was deliberately provocative and intended to introduce a sense of

discomfort in spectators of the exhibition.



[Amateur snapshot of a parabat in “Black is Beautiful” combat make-up. From Granger Korff, *19 with a Bullet*.]

Sourcing original “Black is Beautiful” turned out to be impossible. Although the uniforms and other items from that time had survived and I was able to discover some of the original combat make-up containers (small transparent plastic vials, exactly like women’s make-up containers), the actual substance had evaporated. It also turned out that the post-apartheid South African army, not surprisingly now that it is a largely black force, no longer makes use of the substance. (The new SANDF, in fact, uses a green combat make-up based on the American version, which is applied as lines to break the outline of the face.)

The portraits series had already suggested a link with the cinematic representation of South African soldiers at the time of the war, from *Boetie Gaan Border Toe* to Darrell Roodt’s *The Stick*. *The Stick* was a particularly important reference for the portraits, because although explicitly anti-apartheid and anti-war in its overt sympathies (the film was banned by the apartheid government at the time), the presentation of the young soldiers, as I have argued, is extremely ambivalent. According to “Themes in the Cinema of Darrell James

Roodt” by Martin P. Botha, *The Stick* was also the first South African production to “examine the deployment of South African troops in cross-border raids during the South African Border War. However, as the “Themes” essay also recognizes, Roodt’s vision of the Bush War is strongly linked to the genre of American films about the Vietnam War which appeared in the 1970s and 1980s, such as *Deer Hunter*, *Platoon*, *Born on the 4th of July* and *Apocalypse Now*. Unlike the constructed scale models which are resolutely not-Vietnam in the weaponry and the palette of Namibian semi-desert colours, the recreations of the conscript portraits deliberately echo Vietnam imagery and explore the elusive relationship between Vietnam and the representation of the Border War.

My failed attempts to locate or replicate “Black is Beautiful” make-up led me to turn to the last of the collaborators that I needed for the project. I found a young up-and-coming cinematic make-up artist who was especially interested in stylized make-up and prosthetics. (She had worked on a number of low budget and student horror films to develop her techniques in this area of cinematic make-up.) I briefed her using a combination of photos, from the Border War, of white SADF soldiers in combat make-up together with photographs from American war films about Vietnam, most importantly *Apocalypse Now*. She quickly grasped the look that I wanted to achieve with the make-up and gave an added cinematic quality to the portraits which was particularly pleasing to me.

Something very interesting transpired during the rehearsal and photography of the ‘conscript’ portraits. During the day in which the models wore the old SADF uniforms and had combat make-up applied they started to undergo a perceptible psychological change. From cynical mall-wise Joburg teenagers they became ‘troopies,’ not just in my perception as the director, but in their very manner. It was also apparent that they started to develop into the types typical of any military squad – the idealistic squad commander, the domineering lance-corporal, the aggressive killer, the pretty but vacant Durban surfer boy, and finally the lost boy, the ‘*verdwaalde een*’ who is always losing his kit or forgetting to put his weapon on safety. These changes suggest the powerful situational effect that putting on a uniform and combat make-up had on these young men,

and raise questions about the much more powerful effect of national service training and the inculcation of militaristic attitudes in the young men of the time.



Composite of the five portraits used in the “Black is Beautiful” series in the BOS exhibition. From left to right they are: the pretty-vacant Durban surfer boy; die *verdwaalde een*; the domineering lance-corporal; the idealistic squad commander; and the aggressive killer)

The portraits were shot in two modalities. The first modality, the “Black is Beautiful” series, required the subjects to stare directly back at the camera. As director, I instructed them to think ‘*Fok jou*’ (fuck you) as intently and aggressively as possible (as in the portraits above.) For the second modality, on a suggestion from the lighting director, I directed them to pose for big facial close-ups, with their eyes alternately closed and open. This created a strangely mask-like effect which I found haunting and a powerful contrast with the confrontational posture of the midshots. To give emphasis to this effect, I chose to title these photographs the “African Mask” series.

The actual photography was done on a medium-format digital studio camera: a Mamiya 645DF with Leaf Credo back. The resolution available with this system made it possible to exploit the digital characteristics of the medium in a distinctive manner. This made the compositing of background plates (as in Rand Show 1 and Koevoet Picnic) relatively easy. However, each shot was made with a deep focus reference followed by a number of shots, identically framed but with different focal points. In postproduction (done in Photoshop CS4 & 5) these images were composited, allowing a number of different focus points to appear in the image. The result is literally impossible in any other medium, particularly in the traditional film medium which was used for taking the original photographs in the 1980s.

[Below - detail of the BOS image - Rand Show 2 – with three focus points.]



12. Exhibition/Curatorial Decisions

From the outset of the exhibition, I intended to use the space available at the Resolution Gallery in Parkwood, Johannesburg. (I have an ongoing relationship

as an artist with the Gallery and I am represented by the owner, Ricardo Fornoni.)

The wall space available and the position of the entrance and exit in some way determined how I approached the size, framing and arrangement of the pictures in the exhibition. The photographs of the constructed images were kept to a size (584mm x 457mm) that invited spectators to look *into* the pictures rather than *at* the images. In other words, I sought to emphasize the constructed space of the images. By contrast the portraits were printed within the same dimensions as the photographs of the models, but the framing of the “Black is Beautiful” series allowed the subjects to appear almost life size and able to look back on the same eye line as the spectator. The framing of the “African Mask” series made the close-up of the portraits more pronounced, and suggested a climatic intensity which would work most powerfully when interlaced with the photographs from the “Mass Grave” series. All the images were framed in plain white-painted box frames to stress the unity of the exhibition.

The only photographs with different dimensions to the rest of the exhibition images were printed in a landscape orientation of 890mm x 457mm. This was necessary because the subject matter of these images – the Cassinga victory/Kassinga massacre – remains one of the central and contested events of the war. Accordingly, these two pictures had to be at the centre of the exhibition arrangement, with the spectator (if he or she followed the presentational logic of the exhibition) beginning with the “Civilian Incident” series and ending with the “Mass Graves.”

The remaining challenge was to integrate the portraits into the exhibition. The “Black is Beautiful” sequence was arranged so that the figures in the scale models would echo gestures or movements of the heads in the portrait. In this way the miniature figures in the first sequence displayed in the exhibition, “Civilian Incident 1–6,” were associatively linked to the first sequence of conscript portraits, “Black is Beautiful 1–5.” Leading out of this sequence, the inclination of the subject’s head in the last image in the portrait sequence links or rhymes with

the first photograph of the Ratel sequence, suggesting an emotional continuity between the character in the portrait and the figure contemplating the corpse from the back of the Ratel.

There were two other important curatorial decisions which had to be made. The first was the question of whether or not to display the actual miniature tableaux as part of the exhibition. (This was keenly supported by the model makers and, rather surprisingly, the gallerist.) Here, I decided against such a display, believing that the tableaux would distract from the interplay between the photographs of the models and the conscript portraits. In this decision, I was supported by Thomas Demand's approach, in terms of which he destroys his cardboard models after photographing them. The second decision concerned the display of the original photographs which had been the references for the models. Here, for ethical reasons that I have already discussed, I chose not to display the original photographs.

The design of the catalogue, exhibition poster, and exhibition invitations were done together with another (long term) collaborator, Vincent Truter. Truter, although too young to have done military service, had a strong connection to the Border War through his father's involvement as a "Recce." Truter's response to my choice of photo references was that they were like snapshots brought back from a holiday – but an extreme and violent kind of holiday. Like so many of the younger generation, he had been told almost nothing by his father about the war. Nevertheless, working on BOS brought back one strong memory from when Truter was about ten years old. He had come home from school to find his father unpacking his military kit and piling it up in the back yard of their house. Without explaining why he was doing the unpacking, he told his son to choose whatever items of kit that he wanted to keep for himself. The boy, at that stage deeply into fantasy games, chose a canvas belt and a bag. As he walked away with his pieces, he felt a sudden blast of warmth on his back and turned around to see that his father was burning all his military kit. He was never told why his father chose to burn all his kit at that point. It was just one of those inexplicable acts done by men who had been in that unspeakable war.

APPENDIX

i) BOS EXHIBITION LIST: 2011 - 2013

BOS: Constructed Images and the Memory of the South African 'Bush War'

Solo exhibitions

1. Johannesburg: Resolution Gallery, Parkwood, 15 January – 12 March 2011.
2. Stellenbosch: (By invitation) University of Stellenbosch Art Gallery, Dorp Street, 11 May – 11 June 2011.
3. Johannesburg: (By invitation) Substation Gallery, University of the Witwatersrand, (with Jo Ractliffe) as part of "Narratives, Nostalgia, Nationhoods", The 3rd Apartheid Archive Conference, 25 – 29 July 2011.
4. Grahamstown: (By invitation) The Standard Bank Gallery, 10 August – 30 September 2011.
5. Arles, France: (By invitation) Galerie Galea, as part of *Les Rencontres Arles Photography 2013*, South Africa – France cultural exchange seasons 2012 & 2013, 30 June – 13 July 2013.

Works from BOS as part of group exhibition

6. Cape Town. "Not My War" curated by David Brits. Michaelis Gallery, University of Cape Town, 29 June – 25 July 2012.

ii) BOS CRITICAL RECEPTION: 2011 - 2013

Sassen, Robyn. "The Thousand Yard Stare." *Arts and Entertainment – Sunday Times*. 23 Jan. 2011: 7. Print.

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Law-Viljoen, Bronwyn. "Representation of war wakes us from childhood dreams." *Friday – Mail and Guardian*. 21 – 27 Jan. 2011: 6-7. Print.

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Wessels, Paul. Letter: "Doherty whitewashes the bush-war experience." *Mail & Guardian* 4 – 10 February 2011: 35. Print.

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Goddard, Eugene. "Fighting on the wrong side of history." *The Business Life – Business Day* 17 Feb. 2011. Print.

Carman, Jillian. "Even white soldiers feel the pain of war." Reply to letter of Paul Wessels. *Mail & Guardian* 18 – 24 February 2011: 39. Print.

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