

## INVISIBLE WAR

The images that follow are shockingly explicit in their depiction of war - and that's the point, argues Christoph Bangert. Shot while working in conflict zones over the last decade, none had been seen before he decided to publish them as a book, either because he self-censored or editors found them too gruesome. "You can call this work whatever you want - obscene, disrespectful, pornographic, voyeuristic, exploitative - but you have to look at it," he tells Laurence Butet-Roch



"You were not supposed to see these images," writes Christoph Bangert in the introduction to his new book, *War Porn*. Now 36 years old, the German photographer has spent the past decade shooting in some of the most dangerous places in the world – from Darfur in Sudan to remote parts of Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq – creating reports that have been published in *Stern*, *Der Spiegel*, *Geo*, *Time*, *Newsweek* and *The New York Times*. Yet many of the images he felt were crucial remained unseen. "When you have all this unpublished material dormant on your hard drive, you get angry; you feel like you have failed in your mission, which is not only to take photographs but also to show them," he says.

The images he refers to depict the horrors of war – severed heads and mutilated bodies that the mainstream press, and even Bangert himself, considered too gruesome to publish. "Even though we are constantly surrounded by images from the frontlines, certain aspects of conflicts are under-represented," says Bangert. "An overwhelming amount of war photos show the fighting – young guys with Kalashnikovs shooting through windows, scores of army tanks rolling into destroyed neighbourhoods or smoke clouds signalling an important explosion."

In frustration, he has made a small, powerful publication of his previously unshown work. "I was interested in putting together a book filled with pictures that are so difficult to look at you have to force yourself to do so," he says. "I wanted to use it to start a conversation about how we frame images of horrific events."

The discussion is not new. Susan Sontag outlined it a decade ago in her seminal opus, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, writing: "Photographs of an atrocity may give rise to opposing responses. A call for peace. A cry for revenge. Or simply the bemused awareness, continually restocked by photographic information, that terrible things happen."

Sontag recalls three harrowing photographs taken by Tyler Hicks during the early days of the war in Afghanistan, published by *The New York Times* on 13 November 2001. Documenting a wounded Taliban soldier being captured by members of the Northern Alliance, the images show him being dragged on his back along a dirt road, then unceremoniously killed. In the final shot, he is lying bloodied on the ground, arms outstretched, trousers around his ankles. But despite the "pity and disgust that pictures such as Hicks's inspire", Sontag urges

readers to ask themselves: "What pictures, whose cruelties, whose deaths are not being shown?"

Bangert argues that in order to identify which realities, which photos viewers are not permitted to see, the different sources of censorship need to be revealed. "It would be too easy, unfair and inaccurate to criticise only the media establishment for not showing war as it really is. We all play a part in censorship: the photographers, the editors and the viewers," he says. "We have to take this very seriously. Photographs build our collective memory. If we leave out certain parts of historical events, then no one will remember them in their entirety."

And he has good reason to think so – his grandfather, Dr Adolf Bangert, was a Nazi soldier who served in Russia during World War II, but "made it sound like the war had been one big adventure. He always spoke of his horse, called Malinki, but omitted to mention the horrors he witnessed and perhaps even participated in," says Bangert. "When I started working in conflict zones, I came to realise just how much he had lied, not only to us but also to himself. There was such a huge gap between the stories he told about war and the reality of it."

Bangert came to believe that such self-censorship can allow the

intolerable to be forgotten. To avoid falling into the same trap, he decided to face his own ghosts. He revisited his entire archive, looking for images for his book, revisiting some painful episodes while doing so. "It was hard because memories I had suppressed resurfaced," he says. "I realised how much I self-censored. I found pictures I don't remember taking. I understand my brain probably did this to help me cope with the trauma; however, I also think it is a troubling phenomenon. If I cannot share accounts of the events I have witnessed because I'm unable to recall them, how can I expect others to know of them?"

In May 2006, he photographed Baghdad's Central Morgue, for example – an experience he describes as "hell". The facility had been overwhelmed by the number of dead, and corpses lay outside the refrigerated rooms. The outside temperature ranged from 30° to 40°C and the air conditioning was broken. "At the time, I did not think to send those particular images to a newsroom," he says.

Even if he had done, they would probably never have been published because, once in the editors' hands, it is up to each publication to evaluate what is acceptable and what is too graphic to show. "Even though I felt that some of my photographs might

be too grim to run, I still sent them to the publications I was working for," says Bangert. "I wanted them to make the call."

Some outlets, such as TV network Al Jazeera, are known – and sometimes chastised – for showing stark and shocking scenes; others are more restrained, or more heavily censored, depending on your outlook. "Some publications even have a rule about not showing dead bodies," he says. But although he has come to question this approach, he accepts that such material needs to be handled carefully. "I'm not suggesting that every image of brutality should be printed on the front page of every newspaper," he says. "Simply showing them is not enough. Explicit pictures need to be displayed in an appropriate manner – one that helps the viewers go beyond the shock and reflect on what they have seen."

In the West, it has largely been left to artists to do this. For example, Thomas Hirschhorn presented a video entitled *Touching Reality* in 2012 at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, showing a manicured hand scrolling through gruesome images on an iPad. Most of the images are mobile phone shots taken by eyewitnesses, which are readily accessible online; even so, they have been deemed too repulsive to print in the newspapers. "The effect is almost neurological.

You walk away and the environment around you feels changed, distanced and disordered," wrote art critic Holland Cotter in *The New York Times*.

Bangert took a different approach. Refusing to show his work on-screen, which he sees as too big and impersonal, he opted instead for a hand-sized book, which is published by Kehrer Verlag. The first edition, priced at €29.90, is sold out and the publisher will soon release the second edition. "One of the most important things for me was to create an experience where the viewer would be forced to look at these images alone," he says, adding that his "experiment", as he calls it, is about making people confront atrocities without overly shocking them, and without showing off his own skill. "I had to do the opposite of what someone like James Nachtwey, who produces large books of high visual quality, would do."

The result is rough and confrontational, yet intimate, opening with a heartfelt introduction by Bangert. He wants to shout that: "If you don't want to look at these images, then you don't care," he writes. "No matter where they take place, these document real events and real people."

Some folios have sealed edges that need to be opened with a letter-opener or a knife. What lies inside

the closed pages is not necessarily what is expected. "I didn't want to conceal the most horrible photos," says Bangert. "Doing so would have been a gimmick. I wanted to take the viewer down a different path – one they might not have thought of."

One of the hidden shots is a close-up of a plate of food, for example. At first glance, and informed by the pictures that appear in the rest of the book, the viewer assumes the worst. But the caption states that it is exactly what it appears to be: the "aftermath" of a lavish Iraqi lunch between local sheikhs, Sunni representatives and the US ambassador Patricia Butenis. "It is a demonstration that we can be fooled by our eyes and imagination, and that even photography can mislead," says Bangert. "Therefore, it reasserts the importance of context."

This clever approach, advocated by Dutch book designer Teun van der Heijden, also reminds the viewer of his duties, says Bangert. The media is just a product of the society that creates it, he explains, so it's up to all of us to weigh in with our opinions. "You as viewer are complicit," he writes in the introduction. "You are the one who bears the greatest responsibility because you have the power to make a conscious decision about what you see. There is no conspiracy. The

'media' is made by the people."

The title of the book takes those who accuse him of voyeurism head-on and is as much an act of provocation as recognition of the thin line he treads. "You can call this work whatever you want – obscene, disrespectful, pornographic, voyeuristic, exploitative – but you have to look at it," he says. "You can't invent eloquent excuses not to.

"Some people think that if you show too many pictures of horror, the public will get used to them and their impact will lessen," he adds. "That is so perverse. We might get accustomed to pictures showing rebels with their guns, but never those of unfathomable horrors. Think of all the images from the Holocaust and the concentration camps. How anyone can be convinced that we'll ever get used to them is beyond me."

Bangert doesn't believe his images can prevent further violence – after all, as he points out, "Wars have been waged throughout history; one horrific picture won't change that." But, he adds: "How can we even begin to think of preventing them, if we can't even truly look at them?"

In releasing his haunting archive, Bangert feels he has done his part. Now it is up to the rest of us to engage in the discussion. *BJP*  
[www.christophbangert.com](http://www.christophbangert.com)

1 Blood covers the pavement after a car bomb went off in Baghdad's Karada neighbourhood, killing nine and wounding 10. 02 May 2005, Baghdad

2 Yarmouk Hospital's morgue is filled with victims of a suicide car bomb that went off nearby. 11 May 2005, Baghdad  
All images from *War Porn* © Christoph Bangert

3 The remains of a suspected suicide bomber lie in the street while Afghan policemen look on. The bomber, driving an explosives-filled vehicle, detonated the bomb next to an American military convoy. 12 November 2010, Kabul

4 The second of two dead men found by Iraqi Army soldiers on piles of trash at the side of the road just outside Ghazaliya. Parts of the body had been eaten by the wild dogs that roam Baghdad. 21 December 2006, Baghdad

