National College of Art and Design

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Faculty of Fine Art

Department of Printmaking

DOWN THE BARREL OF THE CAMERA:

The Life and work of Don McCullin

by

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INTRODUCTION

Because of the nature of the recorded photographic image photography has always carried the ethical and aesthetic question of art versus reality. None more so than the genre of photo journalism and war photography. During the creative act of recording, printing, cropping and contextualising a photographic image, the creator and the creation is always removed from the (re) presented event or experience. Due to the process and because of the time based nature of the documentation, the recorded (re) presentation is of a particular reality which is but part of a whole.

Regardless of the minetic nature of photography, behind the camera and the creation of an image there lies a subject of relative political, emotive, social and aesthetic bias remains evident no matter how objective the results may or may not appear or have been intended. Upon readership, photojournalism is not only an attempted portrayal of an actuality but also a self portrait and as a whole, a collection of such photographs forms a particular biography of a photographer as well as a social representation of a specific time or history. It is therefore important not to approach the work of a photo-journalist with a blinkered attitude, photo-journalism is not just an attempt at social realism or an objective interpretation of a relative truth; instead, it is a combination of complex notions of identity, personal struggle, ethics and socio-political awareness, all of which must depend upon the context and circumstance of both the image-maker and the subject portrayed.

In the work of photographer Don mcCullin, the horror of war, devastation, loss and human suffering are endowed with McCullin's own personal struggles, phobias and emotive responsibilities, all of which are expressed and biographied within portraits

of what is seen as an objective other. McCullin's internal struggles become mirrored through the struggles of others. In this decitation I shall discuss and present the relationship between McCullin's work as a whole or singular images in relation to McCullin's own life, personal obsessions and experiences and show that for an understanding and true appreciation of McCullin's work both must be inseparable. This may seem like a redundant modernist argument of the artist as a god-like patriarch fighting with himself for 'arts sake', but this notion has not been taken seriously within the art of photojournalism. What has been iterated and re-iterated is the man as myth; l'historie faux, an ideal example being the overexposed (no-pun intended) last photograph of Robert capa before his death.

The Vietnam war film has done nothing to reclaim the subject or the atomised individual, instead we are presented with a god forsaken purgatory, a hell on earth where the individual becomes the generalised insane and lost soul disappearing in the bedlam of war. The before and after nature of the Deer Hunter, Apocalypse Now, Full Metal Jacket, Taxi driver and others has effectually presented an anti war ethos which succeeds in showing the effects of war upon the individual mind where the subject is used for an objective regardless of the consequences. Amongst this madness Don McCullin attempted to communicate this world as he saw it and experienced it with the hope of educating society through his empiricism. The difference between the platooned soldier and McCullin is that the photographer is an individual on the outside within; between him and the horror is the camera but the fear and angst are just as evident.

The moving image has not deflated or reduced the impact of McCullins work; what becomes more apparent is that McCullen was there and recorded the images within the environment that his photographs represent. Regardless of the ethical arguments against the aesthetic of the photo-verite, McCullin's images are as real as the world they portray, just as his experiences are as similar to the fighting soldier.

'Blip Culture' is the term Alvin Toffler (The Third Wave, Bantam book '92) has given to the pop cultural society in which we live. If society whose dominant ideology is expressed through a constant bombardment of visual blips ridden with jingoistic polemics, xenophobic, rhetoric and censored truths. Within this image based society we are presented with abundant pictures of war, poverty, destruction, hatred, death and betrayal within which is an undecipherable reality. Dominant ideology renders all other ideologies subordinate to it and therefore presents an unreliable hegemony, a monolithic opinion or a questionable portrait of the society in which we live. Because of the image based nature of dominant ideology, photographs, pictures and visual images are often de-contextualised through the mass-media, magazines, newspapers, Sunday supplements, video journals, historical documentation etc. which leads to an alterior readership from the image-makers intention. With the use of text, surrounding articles and underlying captions, the structural meaning, idea and intended criteria are often altered beyond recognition of the original intent. Literary information and text can often assist in the explanation of an image, but it can also alter it's meaning. In John Berger's 'Ways of Seeing' (Pp 27,28) the reader is presented with two Van Gogh paintings which are identical with the exception of a piece of text. The first picture we are told is a painting by Van Gogh 'Wheatfield with crows', whilst under the second painting we are

informed that 'This is the last picture that Van Gogh painted before he killed himself'. Berger claims that what is represented takes on a symbolic meaning due to this new information. The dark sky casts a gloomy shadow over the painters life as the black crows begin to signify death. Depending on the reader this may or may not be true, but the power of the text or caption is certainly evident when connected with an image as seen in advertising, billboards, political election campaigns, newsreels, documentaries and in the work of artists like Barbara Kruger, Hans Haake, Jeff Wall, Willie Doherty etc.

In Chapter Two I shall discuss the relationship between the photograph and text with specific reference to McCullin's work and 'The caption' with a view to a wider understanding of the interpretation of photojournalism in the contemporary world of the museum, gallery, exhibition catalogue and the retrospective biography. With this in mind, discussed is the further development of McCullin's post war, post-1978 photographs which I will argue present a form of photo therapy, an attempt for compensation and a psychological development towards understanding the effects of post-war trauma and a personal experience of photo-journalism.

CHAPTER ONE

Renowned as one of the greatest war photographers of the twentieth century, Don McCullin has surprised, shocked, stunned and moved the people now familiar with his photographs. Through his images he offers us his vision of the world ; it's our loss if we fail to be captivated, disgusted or, at the very least have any opinion or emotion at all.

> Rarely had the relationship between viewer and viewed been more take-it-on-leave-it, and that between photographer and subject been more committed. (Hopkins, 1990, p.21)

McCullin emphatically places focus on the relationship between photographer and his subject. He hardly considers the relationship between the photographer and the viewer. During the process of studying McCullin, I soon learned that it was quite accidental that he became involved in photography. Even though he has said in the past that he wanted to be the best war photographer that ever lived, I am certain he would agree that he never thought the impact of his photographs would have become so extensive.

After a short spell in the Royal Fusiliers as a teenager, he discovered that he possessed a talent for drawing. He subsequently received encouragement from his teacher (Mr. Cooper) to pursue this artistic talent. Due to the fact of this encouragement, McCullin obtained a trade art scholarship and attendance at the Hammersmith School of Arts and Crafts and Building.

> It was hardly the Slade, yet I felt as if someone had given me a passport, a key to a locked garden full of colour and light (McCullin, 1990, p.28).

McCullins time in art school was not to last very long. His father, whom he idolised

since childhood died. Throughout his life, he had suffered from chronic asthma and was an invalid who could never remove his family from poverty. After his death, McCullin left art school and went in search of work.

A friend once said to me in later life, it doesn't matter how old you are, the day your father dies, it's like being kicked in the balls. (McCullin, 1990, p. 28).

McCullin became very bitter with religion. His father, the one person in his life who had made the misery of their poverty seem irrelevant, had left him. McCullin began working for British Rail as a dining-car attendant, but his 'so called' artistic career began when he received work as a messenger at Larkins Cartoon studios in London. He was promoted to the task of colour mixing but the job ceased when he discovered he was partially colour blind. He left Larkins and underwent national service. He served as a photographic assistant in aerial reconnaissance in the Royal Air Force, Oxfordshire, Suez Canal Zone, Egypt, Cyprus and Kenya. His work during this time involved developing and printing three thousand photographs a night. Even though McCullin had this amount of experience, he failed his photography trade test.

> I know a lot about photography, if nothing about technique ... I failed my trade test in the R.A.F. as a photographer, because I couldn't read all that technical bumf (Hopkins, p. 22).

McCullin's first camera (a twin reflex Rolleicord) was bought for him by a friend for thirty pounds. He began to take and sell aerial photographs for a shilling each. During the time between 1956-59 McCullin returned to Larkins cartoon studios and worked copying line drawings. He pawned his Rollicord camera for five pounds but

shortly afterwards McCullin's Mother redeemed the camera with her own money.

> What happened as a result of that generous act was to have a dramatic effect on my life (McCullin, 1990, P. 36)

During 1958 McCullin photographed local street life in Finsbury Park, (The area where he was born and raised) and members of a street gang known as 'The Guvnors'. The murder of a policeman by a rival gang led McCullin to bring his photographs to the Observer newspaper. The Observer bought his photographs for fifty pounds (an amount that he never had in his possession before) and published them on the 15th February 1959. This one incident was in fact the beginning of McCullin's career in photojournalism. Some people believed it was inevitable that McCullin would make it as a photographer, maybe if it wasn't that photograph then it would have been another.

The particular photograph of the Guvnors (purchased by the Observer) seemed to be a fluke to McCullin. It contained a perfect structural balance that must have been instinctive as McCullin did not understand what the term 'structure' meant at that time. The photograph was also brilliantly exposed although McCullin did not possess a light meter.

As his photograph appeared in the Observer, McCullin was described as a stills photographer in the film industry. Within a matter of months everyone seemed to be offering him assignments, including 'Life' magazine, the 'BBC', The 'News Chronicle' and the 'Sunday Graphic'.

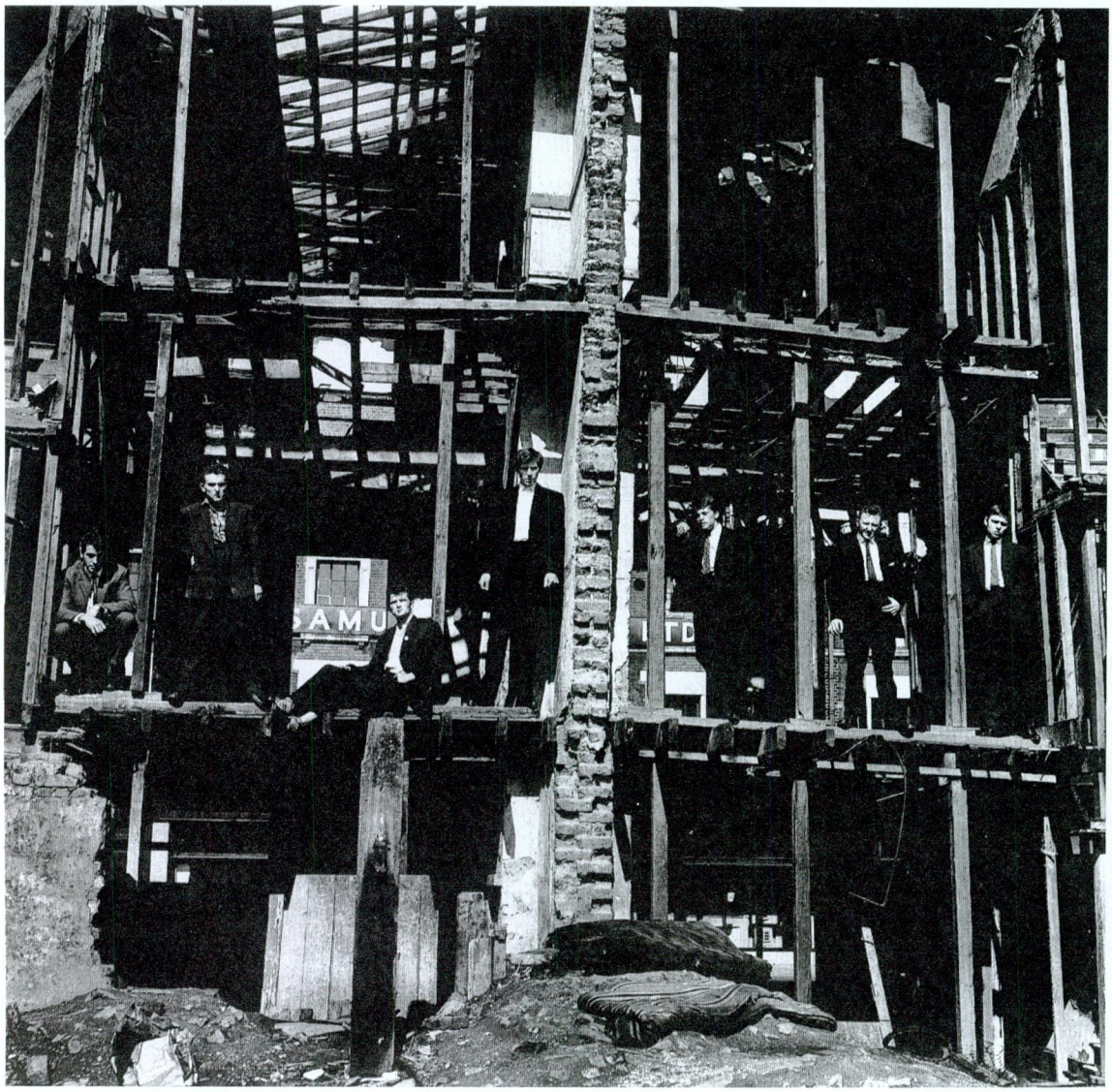

Figure 1: The Guvnor's, in a bombed house, Finsbury Park, 1959

In 1959 McCullin left Larkins cartoon studios and began working as a freelance photographer for News Chronicle, Town and the Observer. He married Christine Dent whom he always considered to be a 'cut above him'. During their life together Christine's devotion to him and their three children was the mainstay of his travels as well as his homecomings. Christine died of cancer and her death shocked him as deeply as his Father's and with a similar sense of waste.

> Losing the use of your arm and losing a job is a small thing ... Hardship is manageable, in a way emotion is by far the harder thing. (Hopkins P. 28)

Figure 2: Don and Christine with three year old Paul.

Although McCullin experienced his fair share of home grown violence, he went on to spend the next twenty years of his life recording and expiating man's inhumanity to man. It may sound ingenuous on McCullin's behalf but he wants to be exonerated from being called a war photographer.

> War photography ... It's something I hate. When I was young, I kept saying: 'I'm going to be the best was photographer. What a stupid thing to have said! Now I'd just like to be remembered as a creative photographer. I'd be happy never to take another war photograph'. (Hopkins, P. 28)

So why did McCullin devote approximately one third of his life to war photography? His main motivation was his obsession with death, destruction and suffering, all of which have drawn him back to the battlegrounds year after year. His childhood also played a major role as regards him taking a career in photojournalism. The hardships and sufferings that he had experienced made him capable of recording other peoples' sufferings. It could be argued that McCullin would be taking war photographs today if the opportunity was made available to him and if he could work on his own terms. He covered war around the world for two decades with great distinction and he documented his own country with searching honesty. McCullin had always worked from a political perspective. Although this may sound paradoxical McCullin saw himself as a neutral observer, simply reporting the facts, but giving them the maximum emotional charge. The irony, for McCullin, was that he felt he had consistently avoided taking sides in any of the barbarity he had photographed, at all costs guaranteeing his work did not 'become political'. In the event it turned out to be nothing but political, for he consistently took the side of the underdog and the under-privileged.

McCullin pursued war, famines and revolutions with a doggedness that turned him, for a time, into a kind of human marker for geopolitical disaster. Wherever McCullin was, it cold be safely assumed that death and devastation were not too far away. If we were to establish a memorial of historical events, McCullin's photographs would most definitely form part of this collection: a bug-eyed, shell shocked American infantryman in Vietnam; an albino Biafran child, dizzy with starvation, clutching an empty can of corned beef like a talisman.

Figure 3: A 'Grunt' (infantryman) suffering severe shell shock awaits transportation away from battle.

> Someone wrote in the papers the other week, about the world's most famous photographer being 'a downright misery'. That was me! ... I've had nothing but occasion to stand in front of dying people and burnt children and people being executed and people crying. So why should I go around looking like those tap-dancers in New Orleans? (Heller, 1993, P. 11)

McCullin was growing weary of war towards the end of the seventies. The accumulated stress of travelling into the killing fields two or three times a year, for fifteen years, was beginning to tell.

> The things I've seen, a man in Saigon, lying with a great hole in his neck and his face making a terrible sucking noise ... when you see that sort of thing, you're not sure if you're in a slow motion dream. You're not sure about yourself, I suppose, and how are you meant to come back from that - come home and be the guy next door, the man who pays the milkman? (Heller, P. 11)

The psychological suffering and torment that McCullin encountered could very easily be compared to that of a Vietnam veteran. Afterall, McCullin witnessed and experienced the same aspects of war. Even though he has never killed anyone, he still finds himself sometimes feeling guilty of killing with his camera. So it is not surprising that he lives the life of a recluse and has become in some ways quite paranoid. One suspects that McCullin has become a more nervous warier character now than he ever was when actually under fire. It's as if the dismay of what he has spent his life recording has only just occurred to him, as if his former sense of invulnerability has quite suddenly worn off.

> He foresees danger around every corner, sees threats to himself everywhere. "Someone smashed into my car the other night", he says. "And a while ago I was burgled here. They took all my cameras. So when I found my car smashed, I thought to myself, well, there's only one thing left for me to be murdered or mugged somewhere and become one of the statistics". (Heller P. 14)

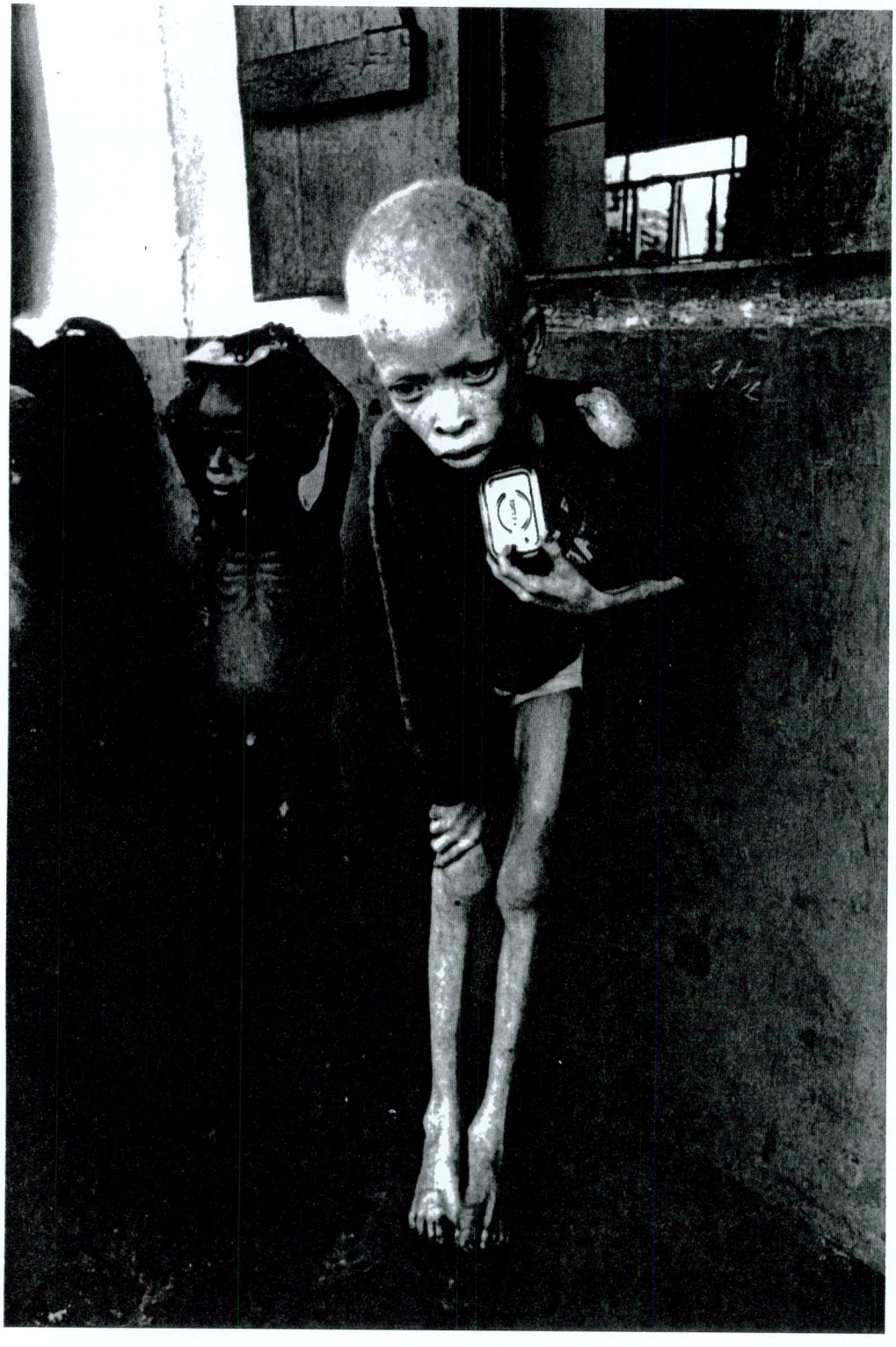

Figure 4: Albino boy clutching his empty French corned beef tin, Biafra, 1969.

It seems that McCullin the man the war photographer, has become one of those statistics just as similarly as the men and women he served in various wars with i.e. like many soldiers, McCullin has returned home from the battlefields to heroic receptions, but now that the war is over and the soldiers have been forgotten, McCullin has given us his negatives to form the photographic diaries of his experiences.

CHAPTER TWO

> McCullin used to think that he had the best eyes in the world. But it isn't the eye it's the heart that sees things, he believes 'If only people could understand that the eyes have a function of seeing, identifying, but the photographer identifies through his feelings. What it really comes down to is photography is not scientific, photography is feeling, and I hate to use this word, but there is a certain intellect' (McCabe, 1991, P. 22)

In McCullin's war photographs we witness constantly an underlying message of futility and waste. His reputation as a photographer might have been served better however if he had been killed in action in a manner similar to his colleagues, Robert Capa and Larry Burrows, because the martyr/artist persona is somehow compelling. I say this not from heartlessness, but because I believe the quality of McCullin's subject matter has severely plummeted since he quit from the front line in 1978.

In his autobiography 'Unreasonable Behaviour' (Butler and Tanner, 1990) although quite a moving book, we witness a man constantly breaking into bouts of self pity, but however depressive a character McCullin may be, he still remains without any doubt the best war photographer of this century.

His photographs of British Northern life, landscapes, tramps, seaside bizarreness and fraudulent 'antique' still lifes remind me only of the pictorial stereotypes of domestic photography. These photographs serve us with no intended purpose other than sentiment on behalf of the photographer. Considering what McCullin has experienced i.e. war torn countries, famine and starvation, it is understandable as to why his landscapes are dark, gloomy and remorseful but they do not possess the same emotional and visual intensity as his highly charged war photographs.

Having said all of this, McCullin's war photographs have served us with a different

purpose. We have learned indisputably that war photography saves lives and we will hopefully learn from the work of McCullin and others such as Capa and Burrows, and in the future save even more lives. War photography has been produced and re-produced in magazines, newspaper and on newsreels. It has given the public and governments an understanding and awareness of the effects of war. Through this photographic education it may prevent war or at the very least save the lives of innocent people.

Figure 5: Burned by a misdirected fire bomb, children flee down a road in south Vietnam 1972. ~photographer?

As a photographer, McCullin has never produced one so-called commercially familiar photograph, however, this is neither to his advantage nor disadvantage. There is not one immediately memorable picture in McCullin's portfolio; for example, he did not take the photograph of the naked napalmed Vietnamese children escaping from a burning village. But, as a compilation his work encompasses an anti-war fusillade. In a classic McCullin photograph tragedy and suffering are unadulterated; nothing arbitrates between the viewer and the emotional extremity of the sufferer. McCullin has never taken an action war photograph simply for the sake of taking a photograph.

In whatever situation you encounter McCullin's photographs it is virtually impossible to remain unmoved. He concentrates on facial expressions and emotions at their most extreme, so that his photographs form and portray a portfolio of pain. It is as though his eye for an expressive head-on image and his depressive character found their pictorial parallels in the carnage and stupidity of famine and battle. Without argument, McCullins own artistry lies in the pity he felt and the pity he now makes us feel.

In his uncompromising war photographs we see McCullin's acuteness in capturing and portraying emotions through facial expressions. In his photograph of a refugee mother and child (Figure 6), we witness that both the mother and child's facial expressions possess a vast amount of information. Firstly the way in which the photograph has been cropped so that our concentration is centred on the two figures faces. All background information has been discarded in such a way that leaves no alternative but to examine these faces. It is fair to say that the mother looks tired,

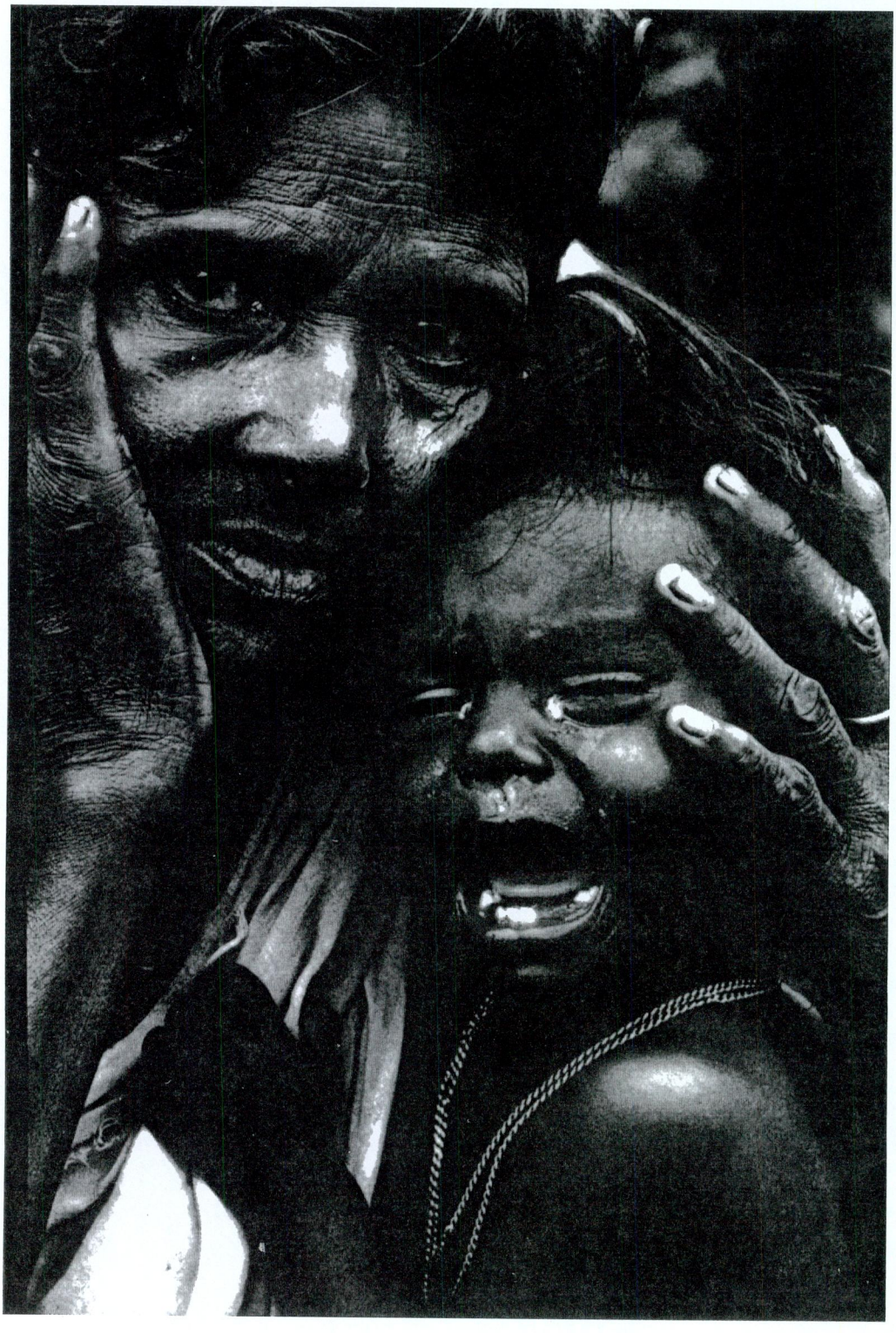

Figure 6: Refugee mother and child, Bangladesh, 1971.

motionless, angry, dignified and/or complacent. The image of the child's face looks frightened and frustrated. We can only assume what the people in this photograph are feeling through our own implicit understanding of facial expressions. The caption below the photograph does not supply the viewer with very much information. The caption only states fact and does not inform us of the conditions or reasons as to why these people are in this situation.

However, if the caption were to read 'A Bangladesh mother refuses to hand over her sick child to United Nations (U.N.) health care workers ...' we would be able to read and analyse the photograph along those lines. If this were to be the caption, it could be safely assumed that the mother is angry and tired and the child is frightened. But, is this argument the fault of the photographer or the editor.

According to Cartier Bresson, 'if a photograph is really evocative, it carries its own message and the only caption it needs is a label of when and where. The who or what and the why are incorporated in the subject - or should be - and the how is unimportant' (Evans 1978, P. 255).

Cartier-Bressons opinion may be quite true, but in a newspaper or magazine publication the reader should be supplied with a little more information other than just the photograph. Especially in captions, the words with most photographs in many newspapers are irrelevant, for example in a recent newspaper publication (Independent on Sunday 30 January 1994) I extracted two contrasting photographs. The first of a man holding a large fish (Figure 7). The caption below this photograph reads, 'Slippery Subject: Thousands of salmon-farming jobs in Scotland are at risk'.

After analysing this photograph, the conclusion drawn was that this is a photograph simply of a man placing a fish into a net. Without the caption beneath this photograph it would be worthless. This is an example of how important the caption is in relation to the image, but how it can sometimes over-power the photograph and take control of the story. If we were to withdraw the caption, the photograph could easily be used in many different ways; for example, 'Catch of the day, fisherman off the west coast of Ireland ...' Ultimately the caption can control and anchor the many readings of any image.

Figure 7:

Slippery subject: thousands of salmon-farming jobs in Scotland are at risk Photograph by BRIAN HARRIS

In another photograph from the same publication we see an almost desolate beach with scattered dirt and debris (Figure 8) The caption below reads 'Ramsgate, one of the beaches where bathers suffered more gastrointestinal and other infections than those at cleaner resorts'. The photograph has been cropped and framed in such a way that our attention is focused on the empty beer can and debris

Figure 8: Ramsgate, one of the beaches where bathers suffered more gastrointestinal and other infections than those at cleaner resorts.

The two figures in the background present an idea of desolation and the composition informs us of a dirty area even before the caption has been read. But, the context of this photograph is not fully understood until the caption has been examined. In this image we witness the relevance of the caption with the photograph. The two (caption and photograph) are evenly balanced and inform the viewer in both a visual and literal sense.

According to Wilson Hicks, executive editor of 'Life' during the 1950's 'words are not of subordinate but an equal partner of the photographer' (Evans, P. 255)

Although I agree with Hicks, a journalistic photograph should contain more visual cues rather than depending entirely on the caption; e.g. Figure 7 (fisherman).

In McCullin's photograph (Figure 9) the use of the caption plays an equal role as the photograph. The caption reads 'Grief-stricken woman and son after discovery of murdered husband', Cyprus, 1964. In this particular image, Wilson Hicks theory comes into practice. The importance of a strong caption is essential when presenting a very powerful photograph.

The photograph can be viewed as a genuine spontaneous act of photojournalism, but yet portrays the tremendous ability of McCullin to capture composition and light.

Figure 9: Grief-stricken woman and son after discovery of murdered husband, Cyprus, 1964.

> "Before we learn anything else we can sense the suffering and the companionship of the boy and the woman. It happens also to be a symbolic moment as well as a visual and news moment, for it is a photograph epitomising the tragedy of the Greek-Turkish conflicts in Cyprus. The woman, a Turk, has just learned that her husband has been killed during overnight fighting, her son reaches up as much, it seems, to comfort her as seek solace himself. It is this moment which makes the photograph. (Evans P. 118)

The main focus of attention in this photograph is the relation between the woman and the boy. The viewer follows the line from the boys arm up to his mothers hands. This unconscious visual line of the child's arm reaching for his mothers hands draws our attention into the centre of the photograph and onto the woman's face. Even though there is an amount of visual information in the background, we are given very little reason or choice to be distracted from the foreground.

The use of the visual line can also be witnessed in the photograph of the Hindenburg, Germany's airship going up in flames (May 6, 1937). This photograph (Figure. 10) taken by Murray Becker also shows the use of scale. When comparing this photograph to McCullin's figure 9, the scale of the boy in comparison to his mother is quite substantial, although, the scale of the people in Murrays photograph of the Hindenburg disaster are much more drastic. The eye is drawn from the people on the ground to the peak of exploding flames from the Hindenburg. The visual line portrays a strong sense of scale and composition and overall makes for a very strong photograph.

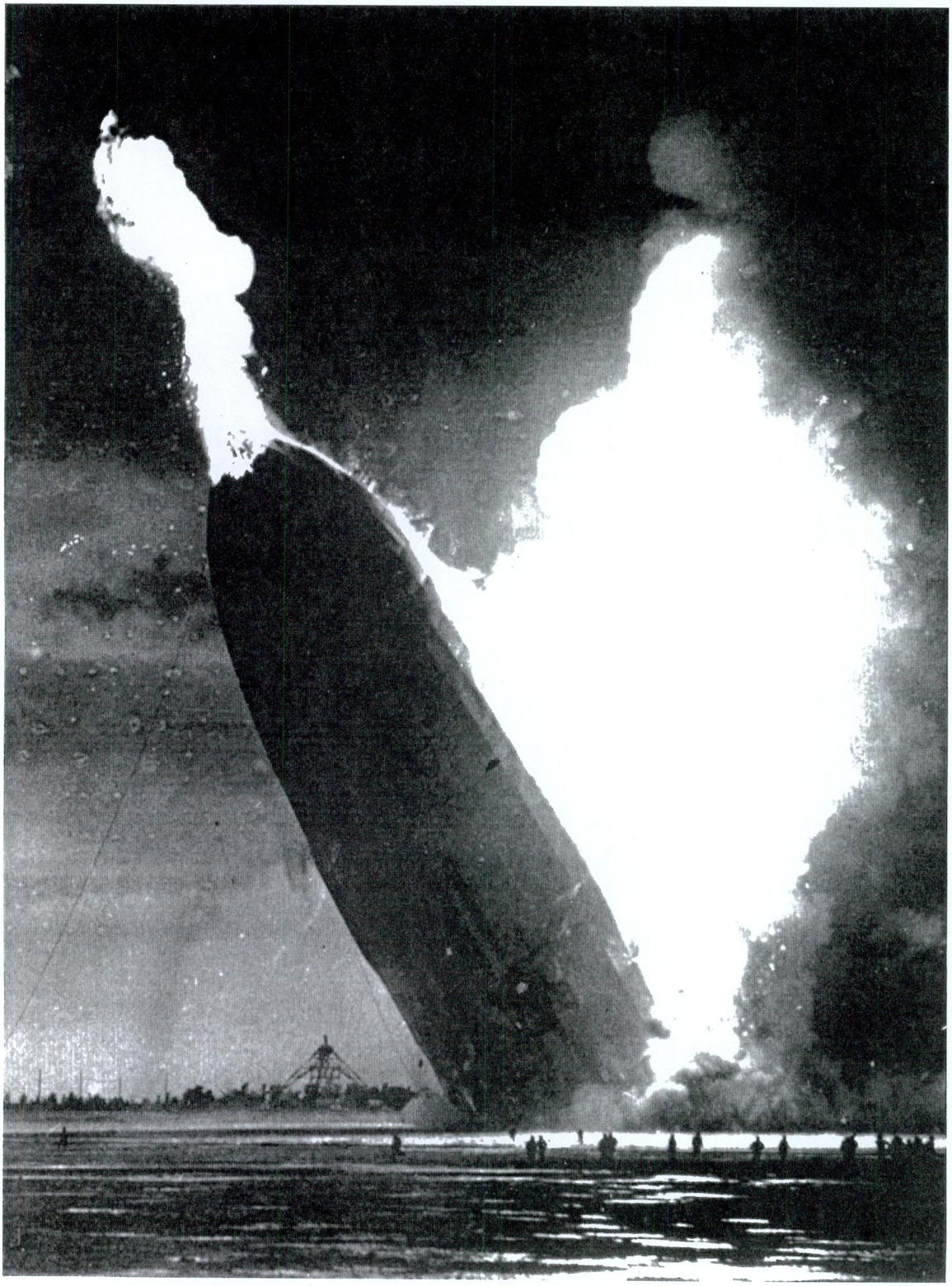

Figure 10: People watch helplessly as the Hindenburg airship blazes with 97 passengers and crew.

The people are the success of Murray Beckers photograph (Figure 10). We witness them as pitiable little characters when comparing them to the pure scale of the airship. In other photographs taken of the Hindenburg air disaster moments before Beckers image, our attention is not focused on the people, therefore the pure size of the airship cannot be appreciated, hence, these photographs make for less successful images.

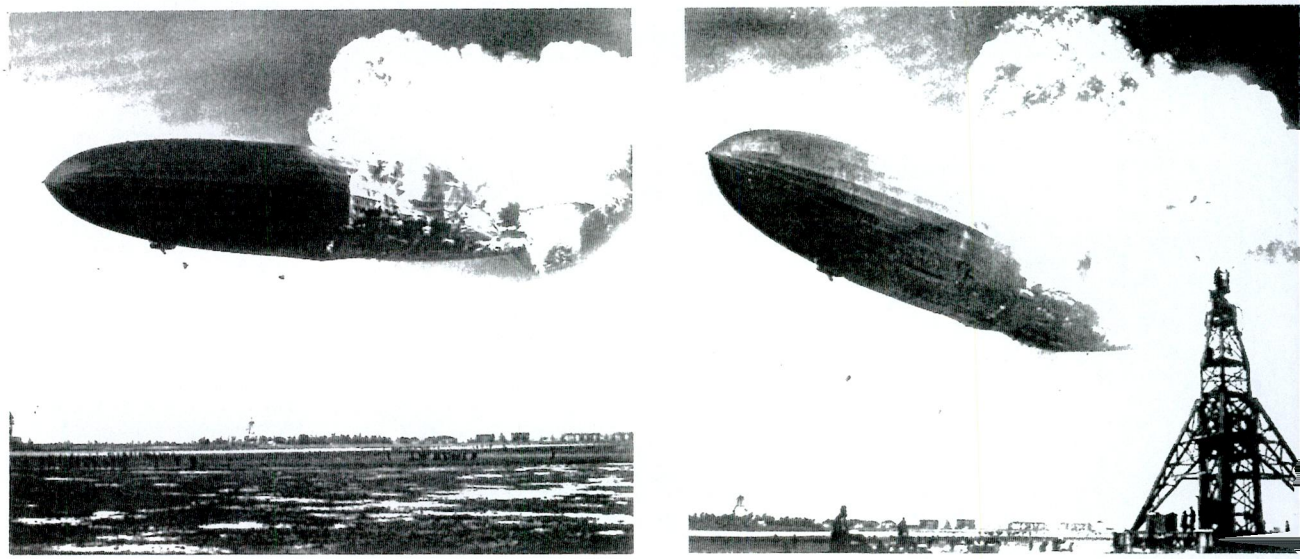

Figure 11: The Hindenburg photographed within seconds of bursting into flames at 7.20pm, May 6, 1937.

In another of McCullin's images, we are confronted with the mother and child image once again (Figure 12). The photograph is of a young twenty four year old woman (who seems to have aged considerably) with her young child sucking hopelessly for nourishment from her empty breast. The similarities between this photograph and the other mother and child image (Figure 6) are (a) the concentration on the mother's facial expressions and (b) the way the photograph has been framed. Although there is some information in the background i.e. three isolated silhouetted figures sitting on their beds, the main focus of attention is placed on the mother and child. Once again, we are drawn into another of McCullin's photographs through the aid of the visual line. The child, pulling and sucking at its mothers breast, clutching at what could be his last hope of life. The image of the child's small hands pulling at the breast draws the viewers eyes up to the mothers face where an uncompromising unexplainable expression is observed, similar to the expression of the woman in Figure 6.

In figure 13 one of McCullin's very strong and powerful photographs, we witness a dead North vietnamese soldier, whose personal effects and belongings are scattered along-side him. According to the caption this was caused by body plundering soldiers. The image is one of death, but is yet quite peaceful. The composition concentrates on the man's possessions rather than the image of just another dead soldier. We are given the opportunity to experience this man's personal life. Experience that he is not just a soldier fighting for what he believes, but a man who also has a private life. The humiliation of his personal belongings being exposed and scattered around his dead body adds an amount of disgust towards the 'body plundering soldiers'. In addition to this, the notion of sentimentality is portrayed to

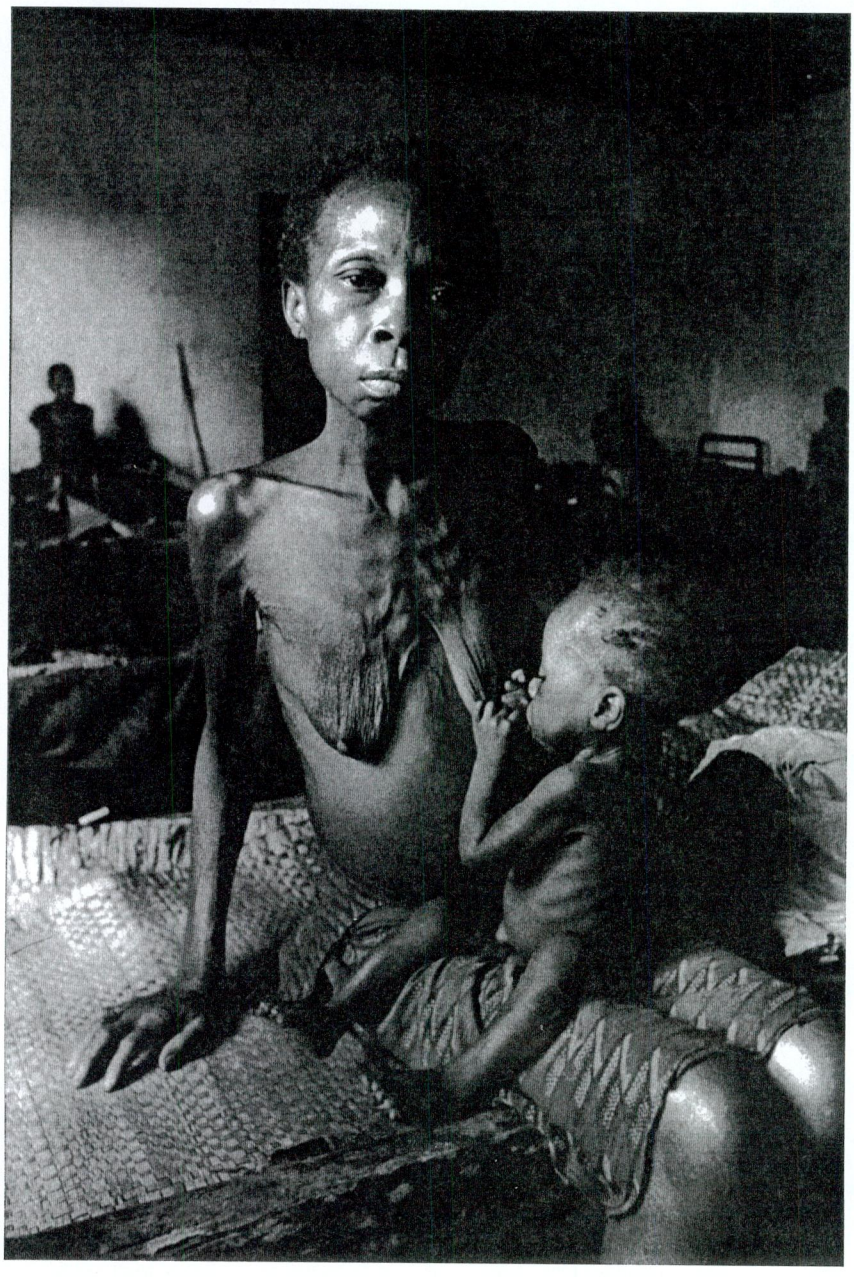

Figure 12: Mother and child, Biafra, 1969.

the viewer, informing that this man had more in his life than just his cause, bullets and his gun.

Figure 13: Fallen North Vietnamese, his personal effects scattered by body plundering soldiers, Vietnam 1968.

Although this photograph is a document of war, the soldiers possessions could easily be viewed as a form of still life. If the man's body were to be removed from the photograph, his possessions could take on a whole new meaning; for example, the image of the bullets and weapon along-side the personal photographs and letters could easily portray the idea of 'love and hate' or 'love and war'. This photograph is more than just another image of war, it shows McCullin's ability to compose a war image as a still life. It has to be remembered that this photograph was not taken in the solitude of McCullin's own home or in a studio, but in the battle fields of a vicious war. The ability to compose still lifes can also be witnessed in McCullin's later work.

McCullin has a tendency to compare his photographs to the paintings of the Spanish painter, Francisco Goya. To make a comparison to Goya may seem perilously close to blasphemy, considering that Goya has become one of the supreme European artists of war over the past two centuries.

> McCullin has said that he wants to 'stuff up peoples noses' the horrors of war and the injustices of peace. That is, he wants to create art in the sense of Goya's Disasters of War, which are not Romantic works, but examples of Enlightenment disgust at what happens when reason gives way to violent emotion or, as Goya put it: 'the sleep of reason brings forth monsters'. (Welch, 1991, P. 26)

Some of McCullin's best and most disturbing photographs present a stark reality of war and suffering, for example, a Bangladeshi man carrying his sick wife, suspected of having choleria, across the border into a makeshift hospital and the handicapped

boy of sixteen, dismissed as beyond help by an army doctor. These and many other of McCullin's visually intense war photographs can quite fairly be compared to the great Spaniards work, because similar to Goya, McCullin has produced and portrayed the atrocities and devastations of war and without any doubt will be remembered as the greatest war photographer of the twentieth century.

Figure 14: The execution of the rebels on 3rd May, 1908 by Francisco Goya.

Figure 15: Bangladeshi man carrying sick wife, suspected of having Cholera, across border into makeshift hospital.

Figure 16: A handicapped boy of sixteen, dismissed as beyond reach by an Army doctor.

CHAPTER THREE

Public exposure of Don McCullins war photographs has led some people to assume that he beautifies or glorifies his images. There are those who claim that this so-called beautification of his subject matter is manipulative, that he turns suffering and horror into art. The conclusion or assumption in this argument is that by converting tragedy into 'a picture', he weakens its impact. But, is the impact weakened? Surely if a man photographs what he sees before him, it cannot be considered manipulative.

The theory of converting tragedy into photography is not the responsibility of the photographer if he or she documents reality or rather what we trust to be reality. For example; the photograph of the North Vietnamese soldier (Figure 13) with his possessions scattered beside him. The question of the photographer (McCullin) placing and composing these items to suit his own photojournalistic needs has to be confronted. If we are to believe that these personal items were scattered by body-plundering soldiers, then morally it makes for a more acceptable photograph. however, if these possessions were arranged by McCullin himself, we are left with no alternative but to consider this manipulation.

As it has been stated that this photograph of the North Vietnamese soldier was a genuine document of reality and if the viewer accepts this as the truth, then the photographer is not in any way guilty of manipulation.

Even though McCullin's photographs are exhibited in art galleries, they also reach a much wider audience by way of reproduction through the media both in magazines and on posters. The truth is that some of the most controversial images have been brought to our attention through war photographs or 'war art'.

The beautification or glorification of horror in a completed photographic image is not in the hands of the photographer but in those of the newspaper editor or gallery curator. For example; the role of the newspaper or magazine editor when considering the best possible way to frame, crop and present a photographers work, and the accompanying caption that the editor will use. Likewise Gallery curators select present and exhibit a photographers work in a particular context. The sometimes exaggerated and extravagant documentation and catalogue that he or she presents with the photographers images can re-shape the meaning of the photo images. If and when put into practice, the above are all forms of manipulation that are beyond the control of the photographer.

We have high expectations for McCullin's work when we consider what we have experienced from his compellingly charged war work from Beirut, Vietnam, Uganda, Cyprus, El Salvador and Nigeria.

With regard to his work since 1978 and having heard from a friend about his wonderful and beautiful landscapes knowing that McCullin could produce brilliant and very strong work under the difficult conditions of war, then he would have little or no difficulty producing work of the same calibre at home. Unfortunately my expectations were not fulfilled.

McCullin's landscapes are printed in dark tones, apparently to signify his mourning following his wife's death. Frequently personal tragedy provides stimulus and inspiration for an artist but in McCullin's case it was more sentimentality rather than pitiableness.

Although McCullin's previous war images are printed in similar dark tones, his landscapes fail to retain the same visual intensity. The absence of the figure may be a major contribution to this fact. Although these photographs are complex landscapes, McCullin seems to be relying more on his darkroom techniques and capabilities rather than his control of the camera. He dramatises his photographs employing light and tone to adhere a sombre ambience. He provides himself with more time to observe, compose and take his photograph. This time which he allows himself may be the downfall of his landscapes. His previous images have always been moments of genuine spontaneous acts. he composed the photograph with his eye and caught it with his camera.

Within these dark landscapes, the idea of war torn battle fields could be a possibility. It can almost be imagined that these were scenes of fierce fighting and carnage, but without our implicit understanding of McCullins previous war photographs we would be unable to make such an imaginative connection. There is an element of psychological reflection in McCullins landscape photographs i.e. he has experienced so many wars and human atrocities that his mind has been bombarded with suffering and death. It appears that McCullin has led two different lifestyles, the first being the uncompromising war photographer and the second, the photographer that now works in solitude and isolation. He has become a social recluse locking himself away in his Somerset mansion playing psychological games with himself. At night, sometimes turning off all the household lights to prove to himself that he can find his way without injuring himself or damaging anything in his path. The fascination with playing these type of games could have resulted from his previous experiences of war. It has been reported that soldiers suffer with similar post-war syndromes, that

they try to blank their memories of all war experiences and hope to re-construct what we consider to be normal life. Hollywood has produced many films dealing with psychological trauma, particularly in connection with the Vietnam War, films such as Apocalypse Now, Platoon, Taxi driver and others listed in the bibliography. Because of McCullins exposure to armed conflict he feels obligated to put himself through these self investigations and endurance tests.

According to Pam Roberts, 'McCullins dark and moody landscapes, full of Biblical light - the visual equivalent of descriptive passages from Thomas Hardy - are like all of his work, concerned with conflict'. (Roberts, 1993, P. 7) Possibly McCullin's landscapes do contain an element of Biblical light and could easily be compared to descriptive passages from Thomas Hardy. But, to communicate the notion of conflict more clearly, the use of the human figure(s) incorporated into these photographs could be a possibility. I say this only from my past experiences and understanding of McCullins previous work and his ability to communicate emotions though other people.

In isolation McCullin's landscape photographs tell us little about his emotional and troubled experiences i.e. the death of his father, his wife and the many brutal wars he encountered. but, as a collective, McCullins landscapes and still-lifes form a means of photo-therapy whilst using similar technical processes of light and dark. Sombre, weighty images are produced similar to his previous war images. McCullins' depressive character has been witnessed in his documentation of war i.e. the photographs he chose to take and the uncompromising reality he portrayed through these photographs.

> I've only photographed things that give people pain and misery and unhappiness. I didn't need any psychiatrist to tell me to look at flowers and the sky and hills and valleys and rivers. I'm not kidding myself because I'm actually telling the truth. Photography to me is not looking, its feeling, and if you can't feel what you're looking at and interpret it backwards then you're never going to be any good at it. I'm not saying I'm any good at it but feel as though I can interpret chunks of life. (McCabe, 1991, P. 23)

Even though McCullin's landscapes and still-lifes do not contain the same visual impact as his war photographs and may not be as poignant or politically subservice, they are relative to his work as a whole and form an ironic dictionary with his war pictures. It is unfair to consider McCullins post 1978 work as mere pretty landscapes, but to appreciate McCullins response to experience and a revealing expression of his mental and emotional state that may have forced him into becoming a recluse.

As I have stated previously, the time McCullin allows himself to compose and take his landscapes and still lifes may be the downfall of his pictures. This time however may present McCullins internal war with himself. The absence of the figure(s) may signify the lack of belief in man or the loss of man's interaction with nature; the scars of the battering wars are now beginning to emerge in the form of a landscape. McCullin has withdrawn himself from human suffering and injustice, the rough, mechanical barbarity of the military life - the fear, the violence, the brutality and the intense immediacy of war. In reflection, McCullin has become a professional mourner who wants less to take part in war but more time to reflect.

In his book 'Open Skies' McCullin refers to his landscapes as a 'state of mind' (McCullin, 1989, P. 7) i.e. they are not mere portraits of rural areas but more a

reflection of McCullins thoughts and experiences in relation to war. Summer light plays no role in his photographs, he prefers to wait for the dark brooding skies that appear in autumn and winter, so he can produce exactly the photograph he feels appropriate to his knowledge of war and devastation.

> ....when the great Atlantic storms start charging in from the west and up the Bristol Channel; when he could go out (like a predator, he rather significantly said) and once again photograph the war in the skies that for him so potently symbolises with its darkness, its glints of light, the greater war elsewhere. The parallels he suggests between these landscapes and the human condition will be counted unnecessarily clouded and cruel only by those penned up inside the sentimental old tourist - board picture of rural England. Like sheep in painting scenery. But a real wind is blowing today; and, like a northerly on Sedgemoor, there is no protection from it. (McCullin, 1989, P. 9)

Within the above quote McCullin brings across his 'state of mind' and the state of mind of anyone else who 'has had to watch the vicious abuse and misuse of the natural resources of this planet during the last fifty years both here, in Britain and abroad'. (McCullin, 1989, P. 8) McCullin conceives his landscapes as a war, not a war between countries, governments or one to one conflict, but rather a war between man and his own environment. He attempts to portray the message that if a war does not directly involve our own self invented killing weapons, if it is not directly inflicted on human flesh, it is somehow not really a war.

The decision not to analyse or discuss any one specific landscape photograph from McCullin's portfolio is deliberate as these photographs should be viewed as a collective idea and not as one particular isolated image.

McCullin's landscapes do present the notion of conflict but it appears the conflict is

between McCullin's own mind and heart. We are presented with the suffering and depression McCullin feels for himself. It is not surprising that his collection of landscapes and still lifes in his book 'Open Skies' has been dedicated to his late wife Christine.

McCullin has always dealt with the notion of conflict from the beginning of his career as a photographer and Photojournalist. His landscapes and still lifes are a development of this conflict and a development of McCullin's artistic talents. I sincerely hope there is a lot more for McCullin to give to the art of photography but he will always be remembered without doubt for his unadulterated, uncompromising war photographs and the contribution he has made to the art of photojournalism.

> Don talks, but rarely of what he thinks his pictures mean - unlike so many photographers these days who, not satisfied with simply printing their work, have to develop it in a totally unnecessary linguistic darkrrom and puff it in fashionable art-gallery jargon. That murky slough of turgid self-justification ... Don expects his images to be their own commentary, like all decent artists. John Fowles, 1989.

Figure 17: View from Iron age fort, 600 feet above sea-level.

Figure 18: A Brugel snow scene below my house.

Figure 19: Summer, Twilight.

Figure 20: Farm equipment for working the land.

Figure 21: Morning, near Glastonbury.

Figure 22: Mist, conservation area, 1987.

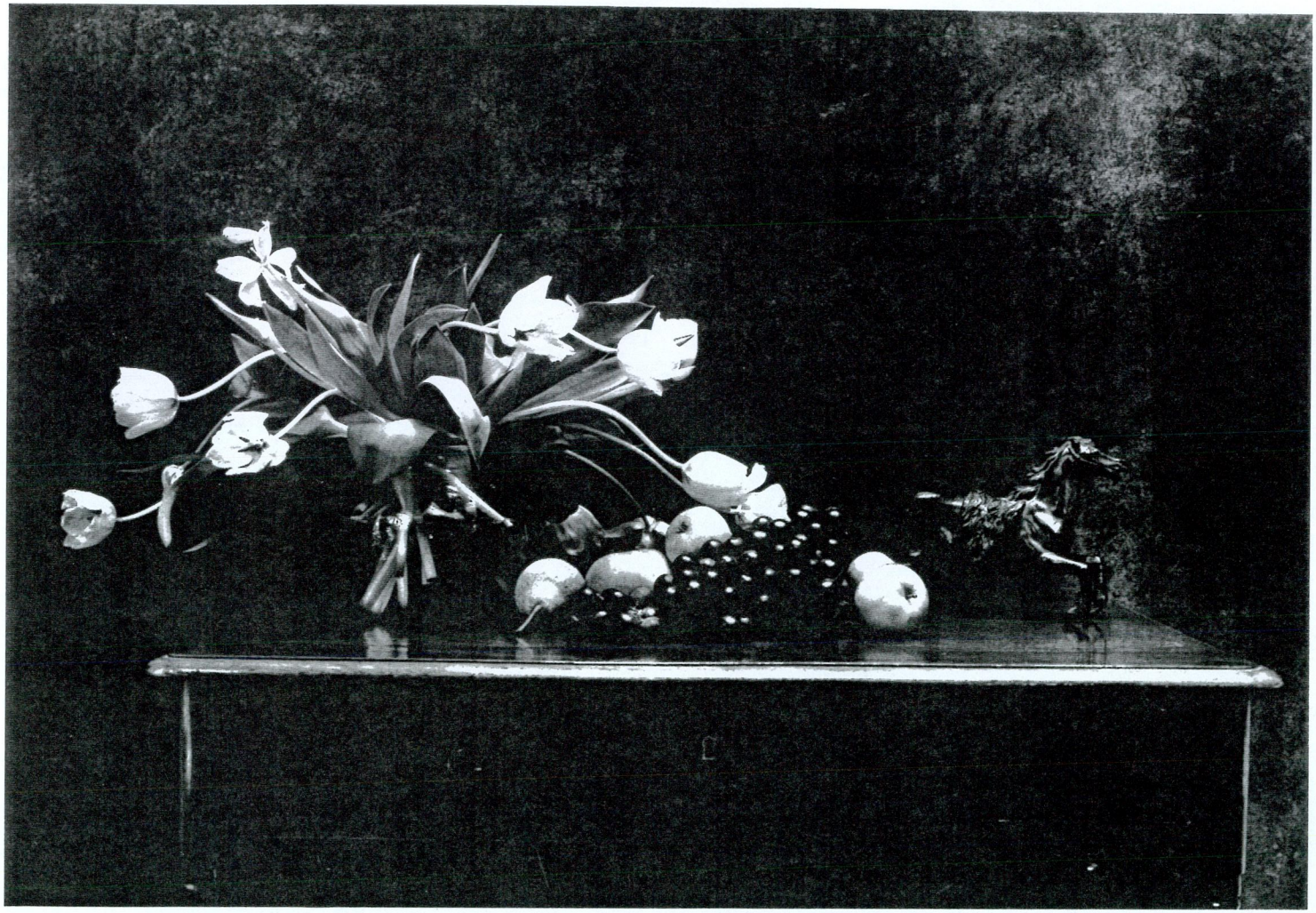

Figure 23: Still Life, Tulips.

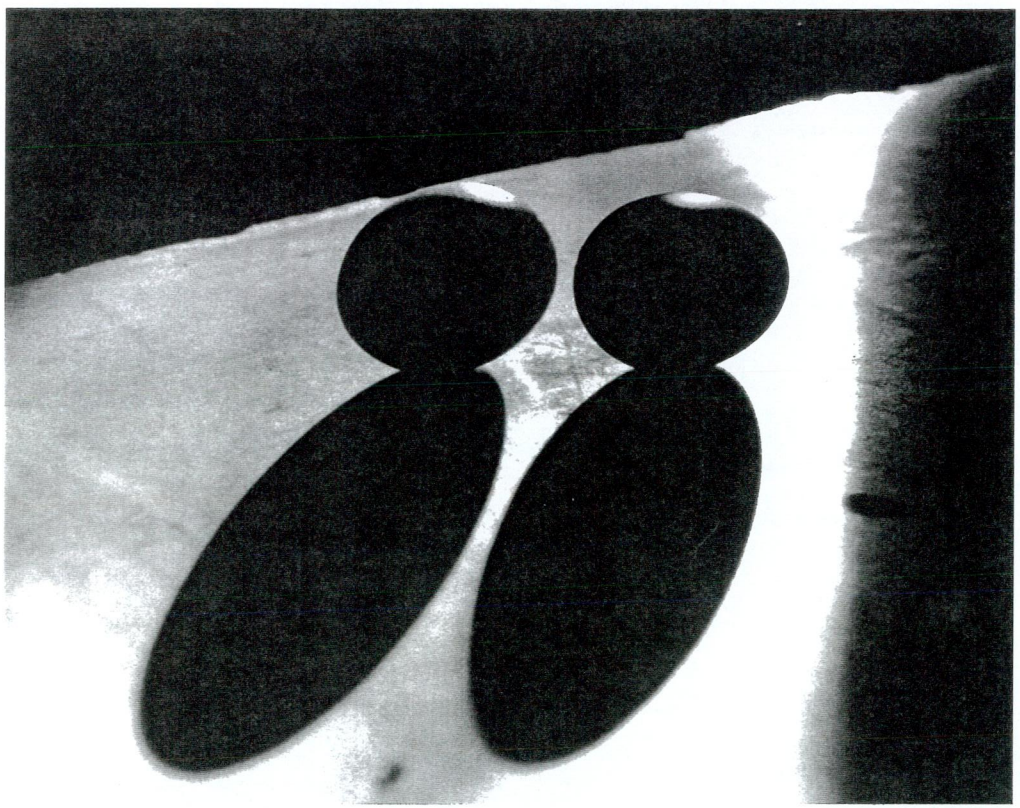

Figure 24: Eggs on marble kitchen table.

Figure 25: Visitor to my Garden.

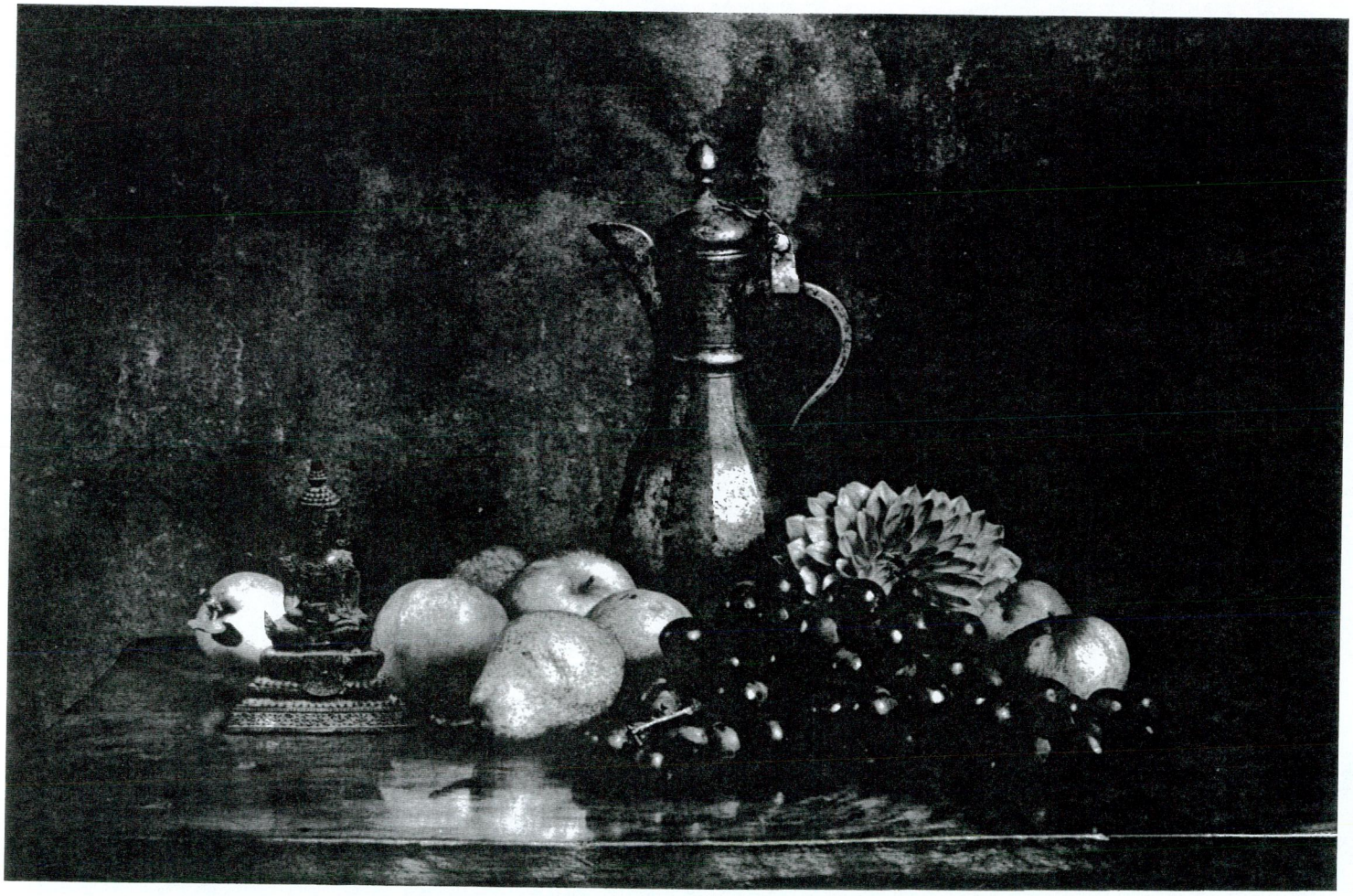

Figure 26: Still Life, Cambodian Buddha

CONCLUSION

> Returning to the society that I lived in was very difficult. you're free, you can go down the road and no one is going to search you or shoot you. After twenty years of that I have a balance in my make up. I could have capsized, but I haven't caved in. But I do not want to spend any more of my life looking over the edge. I want someone else to do it for me. I've served my apprenticeship in the human race.
>
> From an interview with Mark Holborn, London, June 11, 1984.

Photojournalism's peculiar position between Art and reality has resulted in a double edged critique. On one hand, it is not considered art due to it purely representational status while on the other, it is criticised for its aestheticisation of social reality. I have argued that photo-journalism is not intended as photo-verite of socio-realism but a subjective and relative record of a particular time, event, history, a documentation of part of a whole where the only form of censorship is the frame. the so-called beautification of horror does not result in non-representation but instead emphasises by contrast the severity and stark reality of the situation of the photographed subject matter. The work of Don McCullin whilst both socio-political and historical, it is his own personal response and emotive experience which infuses his images with evocative and educational status; the photographic process is the only form of censorship along with a propaganda of an anti-war stance. For an understanding of a McCullin photograph, 'The subject' and the subject matter (the images) should be read together for a comprehension of his work. It is also important to analyse his images collectively and not in divisional groups. McCullin's early domestic life of poverty, the death of his father, the death of his wife are all lucidly evident within his work just as his war experience was effected both in his pre '78 work and his landscapes and still lifes of the post '78 period.

In the contemporary exhibition space, the museum / gallery, the catalogue, the retrospective biography, the newspaper, the magazine, the documentary etc. the relevance of text is evidently important in the understanding of the work of photojournalism as it is with any visual imagery. The context or recontextualization of an image is effected by the accompanying caption or text. In some cases the caption communicates with the reader, but the text often distorts, confuses and alters the photograph's intended meaning. It is my opinion that the modern use of the journalistic photograph and its over exposure out of context for example, Sunday supplements, magazines etc. has distorted the impact of photography based on social realism, life, politics and war.

With mass-media jungois fu form of censorship restricting the representation of reality (exploited in the coverage of the Gulf War) the war photograph and photographs of Don McCullin have not only documented both the lives of others and the photographer, but set on historical portraits and a record of socio-realism in time of war, trauma and genocide.

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