Cruel Visions: Reflections on Artists and Atrocities

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Editors note

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Introduction

War hurts. When hurled into armed conflict, artists face the formidable task of balancing the poetics of revelation against the aesthetics of destruction. Uniquely, artists who are dispatched into the cauldron of combat from regions of the world that are largely free from war, are forced to recognise that the body *their* body is no longer a subject "good to think" but an object that is "necessary to be".[1]

In this article, I explore some of the difficulties facing officially appointed war artists seeking to visually represent atrocities such as rape. There is a sophisticated body of literature reflecting on the art of trauma: artists such as Martha Rosler, Alfredo Jaar, Sophie Ristelhüber, Jenny Holzer, Simon Norfolk, James Bridle, Gervasio Sánchez and Gustavo Germano have made powerful artistic responses to traumas such as combat, mass killings, "disappearances" and rape. *Official* war artists, however, are required to adopt a different aesthetic. Moralists repeatedly warn against conflating personal trauma with secondary witnessing, but this article maintains that we need to take seriously the idea that the sights, sounds, smells, tastes and touch of the wounded body can destroy worlds beyond immediate victims. It is an attempt to accentuate the role of embodiment in artistic constructions of the meaning of wartime atrocity. The term "embodiment" draws inspiration from theorists who argue that people *think* via sensorimotor experiences: our minds are embodied. In Raymond W. Gibbs's evocative phrase, "cognition is what happens when the body meets the world."[2] This article also introduces the idea that empathy emerges as a capacity of imaginative embodiment.

This is a departure from much of the literature. Historians of official war artists and the majority of these artists (of either sex) tend to share a masculinist ethos, which sidelines, ignores, or even denies the artist's body. At best, the fleshy physicality of the artist is viewed as nothing more than an *instrument* of imaginative agency. Attention tends to be focused on the artist as a rational, aesthetically disembodied human subject. The artist's body is not only regarded as irrelevant to the production of images themselves, but also to ethical decision-making. In contrast, I am interested in embodied approaches to the construction of artistic meaning and empathy in war. Basic bodily movements, such as agitated brush marks, broad strokes, thick scrapings of

pigment, and frenzied jabs, provide forms of knowledge they help to create and even connect the "poetics of revelation" with "the aesthetics of destruction".

Militarily embedded artists, whether commissioned by state authorities, media conglomerates, or other institutional agencies (such as national galleries), are not usually placed in contexts in which they become perpetrators of violence. Although, in moments of crisis, some artists do engage directly in battle, they usually only encounter extreme cruelty and murder through acts of sense-perception. The artist at the scene of war's carnage is unable to stand outside the spectacle of atrocity. Witnessing the suffering intrinsic to battle cannot be isolated from all other aspects of the artist's life. In other words, from the moment of sense-perception, atrocities are interpreted through the lens of the artist's entire life story, including their infant attachment relations, adult interpersonal bonds, fleshy vulnerabilities, and cognitive frames, not to mention the artist's exchanges with people-in-pain and their tormentors. This process is fundamentally embodied. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty insisted, "to perceive is to render oneself present to something through the body."[3] His message is: people don't *have* bodies, they *are* bodies.[4] By this, he does not mean we are nothing more (or less) than physiological flesh; rather, we are an indivisible mix of physiology (neurological pulses, autonomic arousal, cardio-vascular responses and sensorimotor actions, for example), affect (fear, hatred, happiness), the unconscious (projection, sublimation), and cognition (including ideology). This complex, embodied artist is intrinsically interconnected to the Other, including that other person's trauma. Artistic witnessing, therefore, requires a repudiation of the Cartesian distinction between the body and mind, as well as a radical re-think about the inequalities that mark people's lives, including the inequality that distinguishes the life of the artist from that of the victim of atrocity.

The representation of war atrocities in art has generated a large and productive literature in the past few decades. Typical questions include: is it even possible to capture the horrors of warfare let alone atrocities in paint or pencil, crayon or celluloid, dyes or digital technologies? Questions have also been raised about the aesthetics of atrocity. Is there a risk that visually representing a brutal act will reproduce its violent obscenity? Might viewers become accustomed to barbarian ways or, worse, end up celebrating death and openly fetishising courage, gallantry, and honour? And isn't there a risk of repeating the great lie of war: that suffering is redemptive?

This article focuses on a small number of commissioned war artists, including Linda Kitson, John Keane and David Rowlands, but particular attention will be paid to Peter Howson's art from the conflict in Bosnia. Howson is a Scottish artist who, at the age of 35, was chosen by the Imperial War Museum and *The Times* newspaper to serve as the official war artist in Bosnia. He was embedded in the British Army contingent attached to the UN Peacekeeping Force. From the start, he promised that he would not come back with "sketches of still lifes but would get as near to the fighting as possible".[5]

A few caveats are necessary. All the official war artists discussed in this article are British. There is nothing universal about their beings-in-the-world. At the most basic, the arguments in this article assume an outsider status for the artist, whose non-traumatised "home-Self" moves towards an armed conflict and back again, a luxury not open to most non-Western artists. Similarly, Howson is not "representative" of anything. The aim of my article is simply to explore what happens when we think *with* ideas of embodiment and empathy in war art. It will do this through addressing three interlinking themes: affective performativity, trauma, and empathy.

Affective Performativity

The term “affective performativity” draws from three theoretical sources. First, the work of Louis Althusser, for the idea of interpellation or the role of ideology as “hailing” the artist into a racialised, gendered, sexualised and socially classed subject position.[6] Second, Judith Butler, who argued that performativity is an identity that is always a “doing” or becoming, not an innate “being”.[7] Finally, affect theory, which introduces the embodiment of emotions.[8]

The artist in times of war *does* the identity as “war artist” in negotiation with emotional, bodily, cognitive and social worlds. At the very basic level, it matters whether their imaginative visions, bodily movements, cognitive processes and access to material objects (paints and canvas, for example) are categorised as “art” or not. Artists are initiated into aesthetic cultures from which they make choices. Examples include Howson’s admiration for Pieter Brueghel, Francisco Goya, Otto Dix and Max Beckmann[9] compared with David Rowlands’s fascination with the more traditional battlefield artists of the nineteenth century. These entail very different choices: while, as we shall see, Howson’s art is the art of trauma, Rowlands’s art is militaristic and heroic.

As the artist matures, family, friends, acquaintances, reviewers, agents, collectors, and gallery audiences and owners pay attention to some works and not others. It makes a difference if the artist is a working-class, Scottish, white male (Howson) or a white, English woman from a distinguished military and political family (Kitson). Nevertheless, and irrespective of the many ways in which a particular artist is interpellated (or “hailed”), bodily comportment and emotional management need to be embedded or embodied to become “second nature” in the “doing” of the “artist”.

These modes of “affective performativity” are highly regulated for artists embedded within the armed forces. Embedded artists are tied to military structures, routines, and assignments. The nature of modern armed conflicts involving dealing with insurgent antagonists, IEDs and treacherous terrains means that it is extremely difficult to approach warzones *without* being embedded. As artists have noted, embedded journalists and artists almost inevitably end up identifying strongly with members of their military unit, on whom their lives and livelihoods depend.[10] Their every sensual faculty becomes profoundly attuned to the hardships suffered by their comrades; the terrors facing civilians or enemy combatants are muted by comparison.

The pressure was not only exerted from the military. The institutions who commission the war artist (in Howson’s case, *The Times* newspaper) also have strong views about what they were paying for. Peter Stothard, the *Times*’s editor, expected Howson to “reinforce[…] *The Times*’ commitment to the arts and add […] invaluably to *The Times*’ coverage of the war.”[11] This bureaucratic, pragmatic requirement was accompanied by an aesthetic one: Howson was to acknowledge not only war’s traumas but “the heroism and dignity too”.[12] Commissioned war artists were expected to *perform the emotions* for audiences “back home”, encouraging through a process of contagion the adoption of those emotions by civilians. Both Stothard and Howson agreed on the importance of emotional transmission: Stothard lauded the artist’s “power to move”,[13] and prior to deployment Howson admitted that the “crunch” was “to see if you can produce work with the ability to move people”.[14] This bodily metaphor of “moving” is important as this article argues later when it defines “empathy” as a capacity both imaginative *and* active (“moving” or “turning towards”) embodiment.

Nevertheless, the war artists’ “set apartness” remains crucial for their performance as artists capable of emotionally “moving” people. Howson was well aware of the need to maintain this tension between embeddedness and separateness. He noticed that, as a civilian, he “reacted really badly” the first time he “came into contact with something horrible” whereas “all the soldiers had seen it before and, of necessity, could distance themselves from it.” He admitted that “[p]erhaps the same would have happened to me had I spent

more time there", but "if it had, perhaps my ability to function as an artist would have been diminished."[15]

Official war artists had grappled with his tension before. Intrinsic to affective performativity as "war artist" was the disjuncture between home-front rhetoric and combat aesthetics. The home-front rhetoric is exemplified by comments made by *The Times* critic Alan Jackson and Stothard. Jackson praised the IWM/*Times* for appointing Howson. He contended that Howson's "ability to invest very ordinary men and women with something approaching heroic dignity… makes him an ideal candidate to chronicle an all-too-human war zone."[16] Stothard similarly maintained that Howson was the "obvious choice to chronicle the catastrophe in Bosnia" because of his "ability to invest ordinary men and women with heroic dignity."[17]

These comments draw attention to the problem in a stark fashion: after all, Howson's Bosnian art is anything but "heroic". Indeed, Stothard's comment was made in a book that included, among many other anti-heroic oil paintings, one entitled *Croatian and Muslim* (1994) (see Fig. 1). Nothing could be further from "heroic dignity" than this scene of sexual assault. Two men press a woman's head into a toilet while one brutally rapes her. It is a domestic scene, as one of the attackers steadies himself against a family portrait. In the doorway, someone watches. The painting is a repudiation of that distinction between home-front rhetoric and combat aesthetics: the raped woman is at home a home that is worlds away from those of Jackson and Stothard. The war artist's affective performativity his agitated brush-marks, thick scrapings of pigment, and frenzied jabs ultimately *fails* in its contagious function. People in those other, safer "homes" looked in horror at the images of rape and carnage but were not "moved" to do anything except gape in shock and awe.

Figure 1: Peter Howson, Croatian and Muslim, 1994, oil on canvas, 213 x 152.5 cm

If the first tension is the disjuncture between home-front rhetoric and combat aesthetics, the second is between sensory engagement with the armed forces versus immersion in battle. In the conventional reception of war art, status adheres to front-line, combat-exposed immersion.

Official war artists could embody three levels. The first was "behind the front lines". Despite the fact that one of the most eminent British war artists of the nineteenth century was a woman Elizabeth Thompson (Lady Butler) it remains the case that official war artists inhabit masculine personas. The first British woman to occupy the post Linda Kitson never got close to the fighting. The worse thing she experienced was "extreme weather

conditions".[18] Because of her gender, she wasn't even allowed to travel to East Falkland on a Royal Naval vessel. Her appointment gestured towards female equality, but actually reinforced sexism. Even Kitson remarked that "I think that when there is a girl [sic] about they [servicemen] are very protective. I don't want to become trite but they do become chivalrous and look after you."[19] She admitted that, in getting the commission, it helped that she "had the right accent" and had been born into a distinguished military family.[20] A disproportionate amount of attention was played to her clothes: Kitson was described in the press as a "small gamin figure in punk-style clothes" and a large section of her published account of the war was devoted to what she would wear. In a foreword to Kitson's "Visual Diary", published by the Imperial War Museum, Commander Dennis White patronisingly maintains that "It was a privilege to give a little help to a brave, talented and very determined young lady."[21] Her art focuses on everyday activities, disproportionately emphasising senior officers. Only 2 of the 90 images exhibited at the Imperial War Museum include the wounded; the dead have no presence whatsoever.[22] Even when weapons are depicted, they are either being used in training exercises rather than combat, or they are merely "pictorial motifs".[23]

At the second level were artists like John Keane, appointed to the post of official "war recorder" during the Gulf War. Like Kitson, he arrived late and had limited exposure to actual fighting. He was embedded on a ship when the violence took the form of aerial bombardment or, for 100 hours, fighting on the ground. He ended up being dependent upon his own and the BBC Newsnight's footage and photographs.[24] Keane's paintings evoke other emotions, however, particularly that of fear. In *Ecstasy of Fumbli*ng Keane's self-portrait of putting on his "Noddy suit" (protective gear) during a suspected gas attack, he looks terrified and confused (see Fig. 2). Pages torn from *Survive to Fight* are in the background and in the bottom left-hand corner is a packet of nerve agent pre-treatment tablets and a detection paper for dangerous substances. The title of his painting a reference to Wilfred Owen's "Dulce et Decorum est" (1920) and the postcard of John Singer Sargent's famous 1919 painting *Gassed* in the lower right-hand corner, subtly claim his status at the heart of an authentic, masculine, and very "English" war culture.

Figure 2. John Keane, Ecstasy of Fumbling, 1991, oil/mixed media on canvas, 152 x 107 cm

The highest level of authenticity was reached by men who were embedded with combat troops. Howson comported himself quite naturally as an authentic British combatant: he deliberately mimicked soldiers by wearing a uniform, having a Number 1 hair crop, chain smoking, and never being seen without a hip-flask filled

with Scotch.[25] His exposure to "particularly intense" fighting including "constant sniping and shelling" was always foregrounded in his account of his time in Bosnia, as were his encounters with death. [26] In one account, for example, he described a scene of "brains and the intestines, studded with fragments of bone and shrapnel" being scraped off the ground by a shovel and "the flies and the terrible, terrible smell".[27] Howson believed that he had a "right", as he put it, to do "very very frank" paintings, "because I was there and because as an artist, I can do anything".[28] Admittedly, his combatant authenticity took a direct hit when he became ill and had to return to his home in Scotland earlier than originally planned.[29] However, his subsequent return to the front redeemed his reputation. The artist as "witness" to front-line experiences was what gave his paintings authority.

This insistence on "authenticity" is problematic: it involves a masculinist valorisation of violence (both perpetrated and endured) as what "maketh the man". However, there are interesting comparisons to be made between the "authenticity" debates surrounding both Keane's art and that of Howson. Keane's oil painting *Mickey Mouse at the Front* generated an uproar (see Fig. 3). The painting shows a barricaded seafront in Kuwait, with dying palm trees (symbolizing environmental catastrophe), a shopping trolley fill of anti-aircraft rockets (aggressive American consumerism), a crushed Kuwaiti flag, and what many commentators (wrongly) described as "a grinning Mickey Mouse squatting upon a plinth as if defecating, an image of America."[30] Keane was publicly rebuked for producing inauthentic art that was both anti-war and anti-American.

Figure 3: John Keane, Mickey Mouse at the Front, 1991, oil on canvas, 173 x 198 cm

In contrast, Howson's *Croatian and Muslim* was castigated for being "inauthentic" for very different reasons. When Howson's Bosnian paintings were exhibited in the IWM and at his gallery Flowers East in September 1994, there was an uproar when it was revealed that the IWM, which had a contract with Howson saying that they could choose works to the value of £20,000 for inclusion in their permanent collection, decided against purchasing *Croatian and Muslim*. Instead, they chose *Cleansed*, a work about Muslim refugees. But two of the five artistic record committee members IWM's curator Angela Weight and art critic Marina Vaisey had preferred *Croatian and Muslin*. The three male committee members including the banker Jonathan Scott and former Arts Council Chairman Sir Kenneth Robinson had overruled them. IWM's Director-General Alan Borg defended their decision by arguing that *Croatian and Muslim* was inauthentic because Howson had not witnessed the rape first-hand. "Although *Croatian and Muslim* is a very strong painting", Borg argued, "it is a work that could have been produced by any artist sitting in his studio."[31] Naturally, this angered Howson. After all, he told Borg, "half of the

collection in the Imperial War Museum consists of scenes not actually seen by the artist… The reason why artists are chosen to go to the war is to use their imagination, otherwise they could just send a photographer."[32] Howson reminded his detractors that Picasso painted Guernica, the "most famous war painting… without seeing the events", adding that although he had not witnessed some of the scenes in his paintings "I could not have done them without going to Bosnia."[33] Howson thought that the IWM "might have been prompted by the criticism of their choice of a controversial painting by John Keane of the Gulf War."[34]

The very different critiques of Keane's and Howson's paintings are revealing. Keane's "inauthenticity" lay in his insertion of Mickey Mouse among the war carnage: he was therefore castigated for being anti-war. In contrast, Howson's inclusion of a rape scene was considered "inauthentic" because he was not "present" during the rape of any of the 12,000 to 50,000 estimated victims. In other words, anti-Americanism was considered to be evidence of an anti-war stance; depicting the horrors of war-time rape was not. Rape was naturalised as an inevitable part of war.

Trauma

If the first theme of this article is affective performativity, the second is trauma. The confrontation with violence, and especially its extreme manifestations, hurls witnesses into crisis. Historians of war trauma have explored the *variable* and *embodied* ways that people respond to "bad events" a term I use advisedly, in order to avoid the historically and culturally specific term "trauma". A particularly rich historiography exists that traces changes in the normative, affective performativity of people in the cauldron of combat: this includes shell shock and neurasthenia during the World War I, followed by battle exhaustion, then post-traumatic stress disorder during World War II and the conflict in Vietnam.[35]

From the 1914-1918 war in particular, official war artists have attempted to represent the emotional, bodily, cognitive and social worlds of trauma, in all its historically specific forms. This is not to say that all (or even most) war artists depicted the horrors of war: they patently haven't.[36] It is, however, to suggest that the power of the World War I "myth of war" has had a major effect on subsequent war art. This myth is best exemplified by historian Samuel Hynes's characterisation of the 1914-1918 myth as "innocent young men, their heads full of high abstractions like Honour, Glory, and England" marching off to war in 1914 and becoming disillusioned.[37] This myth has been especially powerful for commentators who saw themselves as artist-messengers here I am thinking of artists like Paul Nash who promised "bitter truth, and may it burn their lousy souls."[38]

This World-War-I-inspired, acrid kind of art is a visual narrative that has proved influential. For war artists keen on representing the "authentic" combat experience, it has become necessary to assault the senses of sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch of patrons and audiences. Ana Carden-Coyne, David Murray and Tim Wilcox's "The Sensory War" expanded on this dynamic in their exhibition and book of the same title. This kind of war art required artists to visually represent the sound of grenades detonating, the stench of high explosives, the metallic taste of blood and the sight of human bone, muscle, tissue, skin, hair and fat strewn around. It required artists like Howson to listen to the stories of castration and of brutalised children, corrupted by the violence, and to seek to represent such traumas in paintings such as *Plum Grove* (see Fig. 4).[39] That painting depicts children playing next to a castrated, crucified corpse. The image not only visually represents stories he had heard about what was being done to prisoners of war, but also spoke to his own terror of castration. Howson recalled staying with a Croatian family near the army base at Vitez. He later remembered that he was

> lying in bed with my flak jacket and helmet on… I kept imagining the door being kicked open and these

> guys wearing balaclavas coming in and cutting my bollocks off or kidnapping me. That happens to a lot of people, masked men coming in the middle of the night and killing them or torturing them. It got so bad, I wasn't sleeping at all.[40]

Like the raped woman, not safe at home, Howson was traumatised by his own utter helplessness. In this mode of war art, artists and their audiences scorned heroics, *insisting* on wounds. To paraphrase Elaine Scarry, "to see pain in war art is to have certainty to see heroics is to have doubt."[41] In this way, artists performed both the bitterness and the vulnerability of modern war.

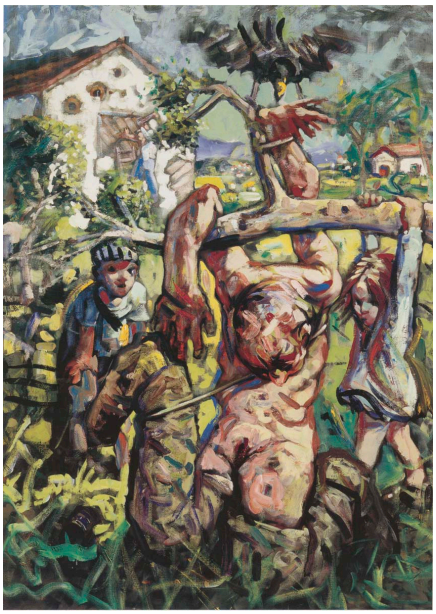

Figure 4: Peter Howson, Plum Grove, 1994, oil on canvas, 213.7 x 152.3 cm

However, there have been major shifts in *how* trauma has been portrayed by artists from the World War I onwards. The first of these shifts was the move from the shock of *betrayal* of the body, senses and mind as a result of encounters with violent death which was largely the disillusionment motif expressed in the war art World War I to the belief that trauma was *inevitable*, the benchmark of any "true" war experience. Howson expected indeed, he planned to be traumatised. As he later recalled,

> This was my opportunity for rebirth, and I was meant to take it. I believe in fate… And I believe 100 per cent that I was meant to go to Bosnia… even though I knew it would be my most traumatic experience ever, and that it would forever change my life and work. I was actually incredibly excited about that aspect of it all. It was a decision I was making for my soul.[42]

He believed that "If you don't get the trauma you don't get the art… It's all fear really, the whole thing."[43]

The second shift relates not to the artist but to their subjects the victims of atrocity, whose "trauma" is said to be outside of language and other representational modes of expression. Although this was an argument that emerged in the aftermath of the Holocaust, it has become a standard trope of trauma theorists since the 1980s to refer to a wide range of "bad experiences", including wounding, atrocities, "disappearances", and sexual violation. Unlike independent and experimental artists, *official* war artists are more constrained in the mode of

representation of trauma. Their job is to provide a visual memory of war for those "back home". This aesthetic can require making an attempt to communicate suffering.

Of course, this is neither necessary nor required. Many official war artists even those embedded in combat units have chosen to ignore or even repudiate the traumas of war, preferring to turn violence into a tempting melodrama or consumable drama. Official war artist David Rowlands is an example. Rowlands's website is strewn with words such as "glorious deeds", "accurate", "realistic record", "dramatic events of war", "atmospheric", "huge amount of research", "eye witness participation", "taking part in the patrols and missions", "desolate bravery", "esprit de corps", "adventures" and these appear on just one page of his website.

Other official war artists regarded it as their duty to at least attempt a portrayal of suffering. This struggle of representation is not without pitfalls. In their attempts to represent war-time atrocity, official war artists often proceed by accident; they may stumble in their attempts to communicate with others; they often seize upon the nearest, most convenient metaphor. But they recognise that a painful, traumatised world is still a world of meaning. Indeed, the rhetoric of inexpressibility and non-representability can be ways of avoiding ethical engagement. Death and major psychoses are beyond the reach of language and representation, but the vast majority of traumatised people still exist in the world. Trauma is the suffering of survival.

Empathy

This is where the third theme of this article comes in. My reflections in relation to both affective performativity and trauma have been concerned (in part, at least) with assumptions about the inherent embodiment of consciousness. In this, final, section, I want to suggest that a kineesthetic engagement of the senses is central to processes of empathetic identification. The term "empathy" was introduced in 1873 by the German philosopher Robert Vischer. In his book *Über das optische Formgefühl: Ein Beitrag zur Aesthetik* (On the Optical Sense of Form: A Contribution to Aesthetics), Vischer describes how, when looking at an object (such as a work of art),

> I entrust my individual life to the lifeless form, just as I… do with another living person. Only ostensibly do I remain the same although the object remains an other. I seem merely to adapt and attach myself to it as one hand clasps another, and yet I am mysteriously transplanted and magically transformed into this other.[44]

The viewer, Vischer continues, "unconsciously projects its own bodily form and with this also the soul into the form of the object. From this I derived the notion that I call *Einfühlung*", or empathy.[45]

Vischer's statement contains the kernel for an understanding of empathy as a capacity of both imaginative *and* active embodiment: both imagination and action are central to empathetic processes. This is what distinguishes "empathy" from "sympathy": the latter encourages viewers to project their own lived experience of sensation and emotion onto the other person or object (in this case, a painting). "Empathy" does not presume that what is being "felt into" actually *is* what the Other experienced or artist intended: it is always at the unattainable edge of imagination, it requires a fully embodied "moving" a "moving towards".

Empathy as a capacity of both imaginative and active embodiment reaches its outermost limit in the face of atrocity. In part, this is because it hurts to see, hear, smell, taste and touch the vulnerable body of atrocious violence. *The Times*' journalist Robert Crampton was half right when he concluded that Howson's "imagination"

was “a huge handicap in the struggle to cope” with the atrocities of war. Empathy may stall in the face of horror; that stalling may, in fact, be the requirement for survival.

This is where I suggest it is useful to look again at human responses to horror. Many scholars have written about the lure of barbarity. Art historian Suzannah Biernoff, for example, writes about the “peculiar power of horror: its power of fascination (for the spectator anyway) and its uncomfortable proximity to pleasure and desire.”[46] There is an implicit distinction between empathic aversion to broken, bare life and non-empathetic ensnarement to its horrors. Howson openly struggled with this tension. Acknowledging his attraction to abjection, he reflected that

> Half of you detests what you see and half of you wants to be there. You’re living on the edge and it is exciting. That’s the truth of the matter… Someone said the other day, which annoyed me, that the Bosnian work was important and I shouldn’t make it my life’s work, which proved to me that unless you go there […] you don’t understand how incredible it is. You don’t have a clue… The sixteen days I was there was the most intense of my life.[47]

In order to make sense of this paradox sensual engagement with atrocity as traumatic, but irresistible there are at least two responses. The first is to return to the pre-modernist idea of “mission”. Here, I am not referring to the artist as “truth teller” Paul Nash’s promise to tell the “bitter truth, and may it burn their lousy souls” but rather as someone whose engagement with the world can show what is unseen to everyone except the victim and her tormentor. I believe that this is what Howson meant in a response to criticisms about his *Croatian and Muslim* painting. He claimed that he did not intended to be “controversial”, adding that he was “not aiming to do any Mickey Mouse stuff” (a reference to Keane’s painting). Instead, he explained, “I wanted to cut out all the reportage. It’s not my job to do that. My job is to do the things you don’t see, that the army doesn’t even get to see, not to be an illustrator, not to tell stories, but to produce strong images of things.”[48]

His disavowal of “telling stories” involves a rejection of narrative. The woman whose head is being pushed down the toilet as she is being violated has had her “story” wiped: she has no name, no “back-story”. She is nothing simply “Muslim”. *That* is part of her trauma. Howson’s “job” (as he put it) was to show what could not be seen: the rape of a woman who looks askew at us.

The second response conjures up the mimetic version of psychoanalysis, in which trauma involves a compulsive returning to the site of loss: a repetition compulsion or *jouissance*. This relates to my definition of empathy as a capacity of imaginative *and* active embodiment. Howson openly acknowledged that he was compulsively *compelled* to return to the scene of atrocity after having left it due to illness. This compulsion involved an *active* form of empathetic identification, because it required him to re-enter the scene of atrocity in order to help its victims. In a very provocative statement, Howson claimed that it was this face-to-face encounter with mass rape that was “one of the greatest days in my life”.[49] What he meant was not that it was (literally) a wonderful day, but that it was a day that enabled him to take a step towards healing his own trauma of engaged and embodied witnessing. This day was in early December 1993, when he accompanied the British Army collecting 150 women and children made homeless by the Serbs in the previously Muslim town of Banja Luka. Some had been raped. Howson described what happened next:

When we arrived, we found them cowering in the snow. Gunfire from the surrounding hills was flying over their heads every few seconds, while the Serb soldiers guarding them were very heavily armed and treating them with

the most appalling contempt not to mention doing their level best to taunt and provoke their British counterparts. Iain and I had to make a personal decision about whether to just stand back and observe events unfolding, or whether to leave our position of safety and get actively involved in helping these people, all of them so fearful of what might happen to them that they couldn't even look you in the eye. Obviously, we got involved, and did our best to help.[50]

Howson's artistic acts fulfilled a similar function. In *Croatian and Muslim*, Howson was not "telling stories"; he was not "reporting" any particular woman's life experience. He was acknowledging that no one (let alone an artist) can undo the wound already inflicted. But his art allowed him to "work through" the trauma of witnessing atrocity. Its exhibition at the Imperial War Museum enabled his personal melancholic wound to subside; or at least to morph into a more bearable form of mourning. As Howson explained,

> I felt totally elated after the opening… For months I'd been troubled by nightmares awful adventure-dreams, too grotesque to describe but they stopped immediately. It was as if I'd been able to get the task of Bosnia out of my system at last. Media reports from the war continued to move me, but it was as if my personal responsibility to the conflict had now been fulfilled.[51]

Interrelations

In conclusion, the three themes of this article affective performativity, trauma, and empathy are interrelated. The responses involved in witnessing suffering do not emerge "naturally" from physiological processes, but in negotiation with "messy" social worlds, including cognitive processes, affective practices, motivations, and even language games. Meanings, history, learning and expectations all influence ways of witnessing war. Rather, my emphasis has been to point to the importance of what anthropologist Thomas J. Csordas has called "somatic modes of attention" or "culturally elaborated ways of attending to and with one's body in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others."[52] An artist such as Howson does this with his kinaesthetic engagement with paint and brushwork.

At the start of this article, I observed that while it is important not to conflate personal trauma with secondary witnessing, the sights, sounds, smells, tastes and touch of the wounded body can destroy worlds beyond those of the immediate victims. *Viewers* of the art of atrocity are being given permission to "look" to stare, even in ways that would destroy worlds if the suffering Other was literally in front of them. This argument has been expressed eloquently by photographic theorist Ariella Azoulay, who argues in *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography* (2015) that viewing a work of war art becomes a civic skill rather than a kind of aesthetic contemplation.[53] This is not to say that there is an inevitable, inexorable link between keen observation and embodied empathy. Too much evidence suggests exactly the opposite. But by giving permission to stare at the image of terror, such art also gives permission to identify, to empathise to either look the Muslim in the eye or watch voyeuristically from a distance. Our choice.

Footnotes

1. This is a reworking of a phrase by Csordas, Thomas J. “Somatic Modes of Attention”. *Cultural Anthropology*. Vol. 8. No. 2. May 1997. p. 138.
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9. Heller, Robert. *Peter Howson*. Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing. 1993. pp. 17–18.
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13. *Ibid*.
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15. Jackson, Alan. “War at First Hand”. *The Times*. 10 July 1993. p. 25. Also cited in Jackson, Allan. *A Different Man. Peter Howson’s Art, from Bosnia and Beyond*. Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing. 1997. np.
16. Jackson, “The Human Face of War”, p. 9.
17. Stothard, “Introduction”.
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19. “The Falkland Crisis”. *The Guardian*. 12 May 1982. p. 2.
20. Kitson in Thompson and Kitson, “Drawing the Falklands”, p. 61.
21. *The Falklands War. A Visual Diary by Lindon Kitson. The Official War Artist*. London: Michell Beazley in association with the Imperial War Museum. 1982. np.
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23. *Ibid*., p. 194.
24. Gough, Paul. “‘Exactitude is Truth’: Representing the British Military Through Commissioned Artworks”. *Journal of War and Culture*. Vol. 1. No. 3. 2008. p. 343.
25. Crampton, Robert. “Facing Fear: Peter Howson in Bosnia”. In *Peter Howson: Bosnia*. np.
26. *Ibid*.
27. Jackson, *A Different Man,* np.
28. Crampton, “Facing Fear”.
29. *Ibid*.

30. Stallabrass, Julian. “Painting Desert Storm”. *New Left Review*. September-October 1992. p. 103.
31. Borg, cited by Frean, Alexandra. “Briton’s Bosnian Rape Painting May Go Abroad”. *The Times*. 20 September 1994. p. 3.
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39. This point was also made by Crampton in “Facing Fear”.
40. Crampton, “To Hell and Back”, p. 32; Crampton, “Facing Fear”.
41. Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain. The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1985. p. 13.
42. Jackson, *A Different Man.*
43. Crampton, Robert. “Blood”. *The Times*. 3 September 1994. p. 9. Also cited in Crampton, “Facing Fear”.
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45. *Ibid.*
46. Biernoff, Suzannah. *Portraits of Violence. War and the Aesthetics of Disfigurement*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press. 2017. p. 6.
47. Crampton, “Facing Fear”.
48. Crampton, “Blood”, p. 9.
49. Jackson, *A Different Man*, p. 80.
50. *Ibid.*
51. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
52. Csordas, “Somatic Modes of Attention”. p. 138.
53. Azoulay, Ariella. *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography*. London: Verso. 2015.