QUIET SPECTACLE:
AN INTERVIEW WITH CHRIS HONDROS

Through a growing thicket of visas, checkpoints, Humvees, and dust, war photographer Chris Hondros shoots on—cycling in and out of Iraq, chronicling the war since its beginning. His images appear on the covers of major newspapers, such as the New York Times and the Washington Post, as well as in art galleries and academic publications.

Unlike the expected war photographs (man with gun, reduced victim, hero-portrait, suspected terrorist), many of Hondros's images offer a slower examination of the conflict, exploring the tedium representative of millions who did not ask for this war. In these pictures, citizens glean on: market shopping, playing ball, cleaning fish, lounging on street corners. The incredible sadness of these war pictures is not due to fast, graphic ugliness. Instead, the emotional weight is the human struggle to matter, to bring meaning to life despite it all. This is relatable and these public images therefore succeed by offering personal narrative beyond the traditional "war story"—connecting us to Iraq, if only (and necessarily) at a distance.

Five years into the war, we have amassed a visual vocabulary of Iraq cobbled from images of remote chaos, channeled through limited-access news outlets. It is a compressed view and Hondros builds on this squeezed sensibility by sometimes photographing street life from inside a cramped, moving Humvee. Considering the street photographer as one engaged in the ultimate disappearing act (you don't see me but I see you), these street scenes astound, because of both Hondros's invisible nature and his overt, distinct gaze that offers up a quiet spectacle of lives beyond the western dream of painlessness.

JEN SAFFRON: I want to start out talking about the pictorial space of your pictures of Iraq. One of the reasons I like your pictures is that they have an absurdist quality.

CHRIS HONDROS: Well, I think absurdism is important in war photography because what else is war if not absurd, right? To understand war, it helps to capture these absurdist elements. That's in fact one of the basic elements of war photographs: the juxtaposition of conflicting ideas that lends itself to absurdity. An example is a photograph I took in Baghdad of a soldier leaning against and guarding a completely demolished wall, just surrounded by rubble and a damaged wall. It ran as the New York Times's front page the next day. A lot of people commented to me about that picture's inherently absurdist elements: somebody guarding a destroyed brick wall.

JS: We've talked about the notion of "living under a sign of personal exodus," your "going out" to war as a temporal shift in preparing to make war photographs. How can you prepare to make images of such tragedy and ruin?

CH: I think anyone who goes to war—soldiers, journalists, aid workers—has to get into that "going out" space. And I think they often talk about it in those terms, so the "going out" process is kind of getting into that space, getting in a mode that can handle totally contrasted, completely different places, places where even moral underpinnings of life are different. I think it's more a twentieth-century issue because in previous centuries, when people went to war, they went from their homes and marched off to war and some months later they found themselves in foreign lands in pitched battles. But now people fly to war, and often arrive quickly. How can the human mind even get into that mode—"going out" in the way you're talking about? How can you just—how can you get out fast enough? I don't think anybody really can. You just deal with it as best as you can.

JS: There's a photographic tradition of this "going out" that's less about war, but about exploring, like Ansel Adams and his total exploration of California. How do you feel about yourself as an explorer?

ABOVE (TOP) Army Medic and Iraqi Child (2006) by Chris Hondros; courtesy of Getty Images
CH: Well, what is an explorer? An explorer, most basically, is someone who goes places that other people can't go, and reports back through essays or photography about what they see. Like the survey photographers of the American West, Lewis and Clark, and before that, Drake and Magellan. Photography and exploration have long been intertwined, like when Sir Edmund Hillary topped Everest, he had a camera, took a picture, and came down. Same for the men on the moon. And Ernest Shackleton famously made space for a dedicated photographer on his Antarctic trip who continued to shoot even after they were marooned for months. Now, in our world, there are essentially no unexplored places, at least not on land. When even a tourist can go to the top of Mount Everest, where are the places people can't go? Only the war zones. Bill Gates or George Bush might make a trip to the South Pole or to Everest. But they can't go to Ramadi. Sure, either might make a hurried trip to the Green Zone or something, but, if you want to talk about riding on patrol in a Humvee in a dangerous part of Iraq, that's actually an activity that's limited to a few. Ninety-nine percent of people can never have that experience. So the war photographer reports back from places others can't or won't go. The modern explorer.

JS: This is the first war where there are soldiers with digital point-and-shoot cameras, blogs. How do you feel that this proliferation of snapshots has impacted your work, if at all?

CH: Well, soldiers have carried cameras for a long time, as long as there have been snapshot cameras. Though it's more immediate now—soldiers can share and upload their pictures almost instantaneously to a huge audience. That's changed the dynamic some. And of course, that was relevant in the Abu Ghraib scandal—in that case, it was enormously important. Though, I think it can be overstated. Broadly speaking, I don't think the face of photography has been affected by soldiers ambling around in Iraq with digital cameras. Abu Ghraib and perhaps one or two other situations aside, not many pictures by soldiers have achieved any sort of large dissemination or cultural relevance.

Perhaps more notable to me is the emergence of the Iraqi local photographers. At this point, a large majority of the pictures from Iraq are from a handful of western news organizations. All those organizations employ Iraqi photographers. My own organization (Getty Images) only employs one, but the larger wire services employ dozens. They can, in that particular kind of conflict, go places that western photographers can't go. And that goes to the heart of what you need a photographer for. Is a photographer trained to go into a war zone as an observer ... to produce imagery that is relevant and to cut through visual clutter and clichés to bring back profound moments? Or, can local indigenous peoples be trained in such a thing in large scale, quickly? I mean, there have always been local photographers, but I'm wary of the development for a lot of reasons. Probably the primary one is that I don't believe there's a universal standard of journalism. That's quite obviously true.

JS: War pictures, either by soldiers or journalists, are a response to chaos. Can you talk about the magnitude of the scale and chaos in terms of photographing in Iraq?

 ABOVE
Iraqi Children in Downtown Baghdad (2007) by Chris Hondros; courtesy of Getty Images
**CH:** Iraq is very challenging for the photographer, for the reasons that you bring up. Yes, the camera is, or can be, an ordering tool. And photographs can be instrumental [in] bringing order to chaos. But Iraq is spread very wide and very thin, which is naturally bad for photography. The country itself is very broad and flat, without a lot of mountains, except in the north. But in the places that we consider the heart of the American conflict in Iraq—Baghdad, Baccouba, Ramadi, Fallujah—it’s an unrelentingly flat and unremarkable land.

The American presence has mirrored that—there’s no towering citadel to the American occupation in Baghdad. It’s just the Green Zone, which is four or six square miles of spread out, essentially empty land in the heart of Baghdad, with the occasional ugly ministry building and hundreds of blast walls—concrete, 12-foot-high walls—everywhere. It’s one of the ugliest places on earth and it’s very difficult to capture that ugliness in a compelling way because it is so spread out. If people could just go and spend time in the Green Zone itself—walk it from end to end for instance, as I have in more reckless moments—that experience alone would color a lot of their ideas about the Iraq War project. The Green Zone is the nexus of American power in Iraq, and rather than being some sort of symbol of western prosperity or beauty, it is just unrelentingly ugly. Nothing but trash, concrete, barbed wire, and endless internal security checkpoints.

**JS:** We’ve dealt with chaos: what about speed? When I imagine war, I think speed, that something’s happening, 24/7; the wrong notion that everybody is running around with a gun, destroying. Some of your photographs engender this stereotypical war rush and then some are of very meditative—the fact of the matter is, there are guys there to cook food...

**CH:** Sure. That’s easily the majority. I forget the exact statistics, but maybe one in six of the soldiers in Iraq are actual infantry combat soldiers. Most of the rest are support staff. Many a soldier in Iraq spends an entire year doing nothing but fixing tanks or whatever, and never sets foot outside the base. It’s important to capture because war is very rarely speed. It is sporadically so, but if there’s anything that’s a hallmark of war, it’s actually silence and stillness. In contrast is, say, New York—that’s a city of speed, never slows down. When war did come briefly to New York, on 9/11, one of the most commented on aspects was the stillness: the eerily quiet streets and air of downtown Manhattan.

So when a war is going on, a city is generally deserted and still. In Fallujah or some Baghdad neighborhoods, the notable aspect is the lack of activity: empty markets, abandoned houses and cars. So that’s an important aspect of war that must be conveyed. Soldiers throughout history have written about the extreme boredom of war.

**JS:** Your Humvee pictures capture a quieter mood, in terms of tone and subject. For one, you’re photographing from a true interior space. And there is the tension that you are looking, and in some cases being looked at, from an armored vehicle in the middle of this day-to-day life—kids playing, a marketplace, street scenes of pedestrian life. Are these Humvee pictures a point of departure for you in your war experience?

**CH:** That series speaks to my experience in Iraq after five years of trying to stay sane and safe—reduced sometimes to photographing from inside of a heavily armored vehicle. Perhaps it’s a bit of a photographic protest, in a way. On the other hand, it’s an odd thing that shooting through the window of an armored Humvee provides one of the oddly intimate ways to photograph Baghdad. Iraqis are often reluctant to be photographed and the difficulties for a westerner operating on the streets there are well known. But, if there’s anything that Iraqis are inured to at this point, it is Humvees rumbling around their midst. So, a Humvee rolling right next to them, even inches away, barely makes them interrupt whatever they’re doing.... The Humvee disappears and you can just photograph real, street photography. In a way I would say it’s street photography in the tradition of Garry Winogrand or Lee Friedlander, photographers who worked with their often-unaware subjects. In our society, a photographer on the streets, with a small camera, doesn’t attract too much attention, but this is completely out of the question in Baghdad. So that leaves the Humvee as a kind of meta-camera: a large black box, dark inside, rolling through the streets of Baghdad. And it is the vehicle, literally, for getting intimate looks at the street life, since that large camera disappears from the landscape.

**JS:** These Humvee pictures, to me, really express “street”—urban engagement, proximity/closeness, confrontation, and of being seen, in a scene. Do you consider these to be war photographs?

**CH:** Absolutely. This is a country at war, under U.S. military occupation, and the street scenes are every bit as relevant to understanding the conflict as the gun battle. The gun battle brings forth raw, primal human emotions no matter where you are—Iraq, Africa, Europe in WW II—the emotions come through the same way, but the day-to-day culture in different conflict zones comes out differently. The street life brings a more human element, especially in this war that is supposed to be about bringing “freedom” to the people. Knowing how Iraqis live is a critical aspect to understanding the place and whether or not we should be at war there—always hear this kind of thing: “Is this war making things better for Iraqis?”

**JS:** Do you engage in more traditional street photography in Baghdad?

**CH:** This last trip, for the first time in about three years, I actually did do street photography without U.S. military protection. Briefly, I experimented with it. There are certain neighborhoods where it’s safe enough where this sort of thing could be risked. So, I ventured out in the Karrada neighborhood, which is like the Upper West Side of Baghdad. It went off alright, there were no close calls or anything, and it was a positive experience. Yet it was still a little rattling, things can go bad rather quickly: shooting street photography in Karrada is not the way to die. When I go back, I am going to try to do some more of that, but it’s tricky.

**JS:** War is the total breakdown of infrastructure, and indigenous art production can grind to a halt. Yet, here you are, purveying. Is there dissonance in that for you?
The Saddam [Hussein] regime was fundamentally a secular one. And, its art was sort of socialist-realist. But, it also had an indigenous, sort of more highbrow scene—a lot of [artists] operated underground, but a lot of them didn't. I remember when I was trying to get into Iraq before the war, when Saddam was still in power. I was having a hard time getting a visa. I remember a guy at the Iraqi embassy suggested that I apply for the June 2003 Baghdad Photo Expo, to get a visa that way, and then get in as a participant. And I said, “June 2003 Photo Expo?” You know, this is in March 2003, the invasion was imminent. “You actually think that there’s going to be the June Photo Expo in Baghdad? Are you out of your mind? There’s going to be an invasion here in a week or two, man.”

So, in the immediate aftermath of the war, there was a sort of brief flourishing of what we would consider art. Like, for instance, when the Saddam statue was torn down in the central square of Baghdad, a copper sculpture that somebody pressed was put up in its place, and actually—last I checked—is still there. We still haven’t registered the enormous disconnect that we have with the Islamic traditions, especially the Shi'ite tradition in Iraq. So, the Shi'ites who have taken power there—they’re pious, religious Shi'ites. They would not identify the public sculpture ... replacing the Saddam statue, as indigenous Iraqi art. They would see it as western corruption—it’s a sculpture in their minds.

JS: But don’t you think they see it as “western corruption” because what is art but free expression, choices?

CH: Well, it does to us—it actually doesn’t to them. If you think about it like in the Islamic tradition, freedom of expression is not paramount. I’d say the main Islamic art forms are architecture, usually manifested in mosques, calligraphy, and rugs, textile design. But, if you look at all those things, there’s no premium placed on originality in the western sense. It’s not a totally personal expression. It’s more the collective idea. It’s more like tapping into long-held tradition and adding ... to it, but staying very much within the rules. We also see this with the fashions—the black unadorned abaya, for instance. Millions of Iraqi women wear that. We can’t just airy discount it as if it doesn’t exist and they don’t have any sense of fashion. That’s their culture—we have to process it.

JS: Some photography, certainly street photography, involves luck—right place, right time. Like photographing the Iraqi family just after they’ve been shot up. That’s a certain luck.

CH: Luck, as it pertains to documentary news photography and its pictorial elements, is important to understand. And it’s part of the creative process, and in a way I don’t really think it’s any different than other, more imaginative visual arts. So for instance, in the pictures of the checkpoint family shooting, people have remarked a lot about the issues of lighting, the streaks of blood on the little girl’s face that many people have likened to tears of blood, characteristic of Byzantine crucifixion paintings. And of course, it’s easy to dismiss that as “luck.” And also, to imagine, conversely, that the photographer’s looking for those kind of pictorial elements. But the reality is, it’s a creative process ... I don’t think a painter would sit there and necessarily say, “oh, I set out to paint a painting that incorporates these specific visual elements.” It comes from somewhere deeper than that, and comes out like how a novelist talks about where their characters come from. Very often they don’t totally know themselves. So, I think it’s very much the same within photography—that these elements recur again and again in the imagery, without the real conscious looking for them, setting out to find them. They just seem to exist in the world of war.

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