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Julian Stallabrass
Memory of Fire: Images of War and The War of Images
Special book review by James Mc Ardle
Do we need another book full of images of war and mortal cruelty? Julian Stallabrass leaves the reader in no doubt of this quandary in his new title *Memory of Fire: Images of War and the War of Images*, published by Photoworks.

It begins with a caveat about how his task as curator of the 2008 Brighton Photo Biennial, from whence the material presented here originally came, was akin to that of the journalist, Vasily Grossman’s story of the Red Army’s jocular propping of frozen German soldiers’ corpses as the soldiers advanced south of Kharkov – insomuch as arranging photographs of the dead into something coherent and meaningful. The book then proceeds with an extract from Eduardo Galeano’s *Memory of Fire*, itself a story of lost history, which serves to remind us of the vital preservative value of the archive, and its vulnerability to destruction or revision. Its inclusion begs the question: should we lose these records of conflict; will history repeat itself without our knowing?

What follows is spreads of provocative war images from professional photographers, military amateurs and artists, some now all-too-familiar, each vividly introducing a chapter of the book including *The Power and Impotence of Images*; *Making an Ugly World Beautiful? Morality and Aesthetics in the Aftermath*; and *Embedded with Murderers: Balad, Iraq, 15 July, 2003*. Images of war and their use as agents of warfare (the war of images) are the two sides of the same coin and, throughout, Stallabrass confronts their corporate and mercenary potential.

Clearly, the pornography of war is irresistible. There is a masochistic rush in exposing oneself to the images included here; how “gruesome/awesome” (to quote Evan Wright of *Rolling Stone Magazine*) it is to witness the perennial opening image *Abu Ghraib 11.51 pm Nov 7 2003*. Cpl Graner and PFC England posed for the picture, which was taken by SPC Harman to be made involuntarily complicit in an act like that described by Grossman? Stallabrass judiciously tackles complexities in the imaging of violence, revealing conflicts between their instrumentality and aesthetics, which he tirelessly wrestled with during the process of curating the Biennial. That same year regretfully saw the passing of Philip Jones Griffiths, whose *Vietnam Inc.* is one sure instance in which images changed the course of a war. With the aim of scrutinising art, document and ethics in extremis, Stallabrass, asks whether Jones Griffiths oriented *Vietnam Inc.* while taking the pictures or as prompted by anti-war sentiment, eliciting the arresting reply; “I distrusted them [...] suspicious of those weekend, armchair communists!”