

WAR. War could be described in a plethora of contrasting words. It is one of the very few things that is hastily chaotic but agonizingly slow. In these moments, it is capable of bringing out the worst and best of humanity, stripping down life's complexities leaving the human spirit to its simplest most raw form. These fleeting moments are captured by war photographers and photojournalists, not only as a means of documenting historical events, but also gives an eye-opening perspective of the fine details, having them permanently immortalized for all to see. Among this group was Chris Hondros, an American photojournalist for Getty Images based in New York. During his career circa 2003, he travelled to Liberia at the height of its second civil war, capturing a wide scope of photos from every walk of life. In this essay, I will explore the meaning of the decisive moment and how it is utilised to capture points in constantly moving sequences of life, especially when movement turns to chaos. Analysing pieces taken by war photographer Chris Hondros during the Liberian Civil War.

“For the world is movement, and you cannot be stationary in your attitude toward something that is moving.”

- Henri Cartier-Bresson

Probably one of Chris Hondros' most infamous photos from this era, it depicts Joseph Duo, a Liberian militia commander loyal to the government, exulting after firing a rocket-propelled grenade at rebel forces on a key strategic bridge. In attempt to overthrow President Charles Taylor's government, frequent rebel attacks were striking Liberia's capital, Monrovia. Taken on July 20, 2003, from a bridge leading directly into the city, government forces had just succeeded in pushing back the rebels after fierce fighting at the edge of the city center. Moments before the shutter clicked, Hondros was spotted by a squadron of the president's child soldiers defending the bridge. Their commander, Joseph Duo, called out in Liberian Patois, “Oh good, white man, you come on bridge!” As Hondros approached, Duo launched an RPG straight into a group of attacking rebels. After which, he then turned and leaped toward Hondros, letting out a battle cry.

Our eye is immediately drawn to Duo's adrenaline-filled jump toward the camera with both boots off the ground, arms outstretched. Shirtless and dreadlocked, his dominating presence is sharp. Cutting through the dust, he contrasts against the clouds in the sky and the concrete walls enclosing him. The walls flanking the bridge narrow our field of view, drawing our focus toward the central figure. Additionally, the repetition of its battlement-like cutouts creates a visual rhythm that funnels our gaze toward the central subject, intensifying the sense of depth and momentum. We are then led to his almost maniacal expression: eyes piercing the lens, mouth agape you can almost hear his scream. His forehead is furrowed with such unbridled, raw emotion that it could be impossible to tell whether he is screaming from despair or victory.

Yet beyond Joseph, details scattered across the foreground tell a deeper story. Beneath his boots, bullet casings and debris litter the ground, almost providing an echo of violence contrasting with Joseph leaping above them.

Overall, this powerful image captures the rare intense emotion that warfare is capable of provoking. When we blur the brutality and suffering of the enemy, we get the victorious triumph in the foreground. Hondros' timing perfectly immortalizes moments which embody the paradox of war: an equal yet opposite culmination of euphoria and devastation. Years later upon seeing the image, Duo reflected, "I was happy at that time because I was defending my country." Yet he later confessed, "It gives me memories of war."

"I always try to keep my work focused on the people most impacted by these conflicts."
- Chris Hondros

In the following days, the rebel militias laid siege to Monrovia through a relentless series of machine-gun fire and mortar strikes. President Charles Taylor reported that within an eight-day period, the attacks had claimed the lives of over one thousand people. Amidst the chaos, which was engulfing Liberia's capital, Hondros had captured scenes of civilians desperately trying to mend the injured and tend to the bodies scattered across the streets.

This heartbreaking photo depicts a man despairing while a wheelbarrow is being brought to gather the body of a child killed by mortar fire. Taking place on July 21st neighbouring the U.S. Embassy, mortar shells had hit the Greystone refugee camp. Fighting in the Liberian capital intensified on July 21st as some sixty people were killed when mortars, believed to be fired by rebel troops, pounded the city.

The main focus-point of this photo is the despairing man at the center, his arms raised almost as if he is pleading. His face agonizingly contorted, which only conveys and amplifies the weight of the loss. His direction leads us to the child. While we cannot explicitly see the state of the body, their bloodied and limp arm being held up delivers enough of a message. This implicit horror is also reflected in the faces of the villagers. Behind the despairing man, an elderly lady leans against a steel beam, her hand pressed to her chest in horror. If her face of terror hadn't conveyed her emotion enough, her posture also conveys both disbelief and helplessness. To the right, the man gripping the wheelbarrow stands void of expression, his face fixed in an expression of cold sorrow. This numbness is shared with the others in the background, who stand in a stunned silence.

Hondros' haunting composition using diagonal lines draws the eye from outstretched hands of the grieving man to the raised arm in the foreground, creating a visual trail of loss and despair. While there are some who repress the pain with numbness, some have reached a point of exhaustion where they are overwhelmed and exasperated. Caught within a split second, it documents not only the visible devastation of war but also a deeper glimpse of shared grief and suffering.

This haunting image was taken on July 25th, depicting shocked Liberians looking at the body of a woman who was killed by a mortar shell while gathering water. A fresh round of shelling had terrorized Monrovia early in the morning, as government forces and rebel troops battled for control of the Liberian capital. At least twelve civilians were killed in the process.

We are first captured to the upper third of the picture, where a small group of eight bystanders bear witness to the horrific scene. The five men on the left portion hold expressions of that same numbingly cold sorrow. This seems to be contrasted by the expression of the three women on the right portion, where their faces look visibly shaken by the sight. However, all of their elevated positions on the landing creates an almost vivid visual divide between the living and the dead.

When we descend leading lines created from the steps, we catch glimpse of the woman in the lower third of the frame, sprawled on the staircase with streaks of blood running down her face. The damaged walls narrow the scene. Creating an almost claustrophobic atmosphere about the stairway, narrowing the viewers gaze to only the victim. Beside her there is a red cloth, possibly coloured through being soaked in her blood. Below that is the bucket of water the woman was gathering, now stains of blood are collected at the base. This serves as a symbol at how death and devastation can happen so suddenly and how helpless and destitute it could render the surrounding passerbys.

Hondros' composition and timing perfectly capture this fleeting moment. Before the body is moved or the crowd disperses, it becomes a record of the exact point at which ordinary life is displaced. All they can do is watch. In this way, Hondros' composition doesn't just depict a victim; but also presents the effect it has on all who witness it.

This image depicts medics and staff from Doctors Without Borders who are preparing to dig a grave for a man who was hit by a stray bullet a few hours prior. Taking place on July 29th, despite calls for a cease-fire by rebel forces, gunfire and explosions continued raging in the Liberian capital, taking many more innocent lives.

The first thing that catches our attention is the looming presence of the two shovels. Being positioned close to the camera, they dominate the foreground, as if they are waiting for the man to be placed in the body bag for burial. Looking onto the surface of these shovels, a layer of dirt coats the blade, indicating to us that this may not have been their first burial that day. The cycle of death has become a routine in Monrovia.

Marked by footprints and scattered debris, the sandy ground speaks a story of a quiet aftermath that trails behind the chaos. Its muted colour provides contrast against the white cloth on the body bag, leading us directly to the group. The blurred figures of the medics and staff lifting the body creates a strong contrast between the foreground and background. This separation between the two visual planes may reflect the emotional distance between the inevitable act of death and those forced to carry it out. Additionally, beyond the workers, we can see a wheelbarrow. As a recurring tool seen throughout Hondros' documentation in Liberia, wheelbarrows were frequently used as a means of transporting the injured or the dead. This case seems to be no different. Seeing the array of objects, a process can be deciphered, a tragically familiar process to the Liberian people.

Hondros' brilliant composition of a low angle shot fully grounds and immerses the viewer not as an observer standing above tragedy, but as someone at its level, close to the ground where the final work of death takes place. Through giving visual priority to the shovels, Hondros allows the inanimate objects to recount the story. Tools are often seen as extensions of the body, serving as symbols of endurance, necessity, and survival. And yet, now they stand as silent witnesses to tragedy.

“The creative act lasts but a brief moment, a lightning instant of give-and-take, just long enough for you to level the camera and to trap the fleeting prey in your little box.”

- Henri Cartier-Bresson

In conclusion, Chris Hondros' photographs from the Second Liberian Civil War perfectly showcase how the decisive moment becomes an essential tool for revealing the finer details amid the fast blur of chaos, provoked by war. Each frame capturing a precise point in time where movement, emotion, and circumstance combine into a single immortalized moment. However, this very assumption raises questions within itself on how much a single instant can truly represent the scale of suffering outside of it. Through an in-depth analysis of these elements, it becomes readily apparent that Hondros utilises the decisive moment not only as a technical skill, but also as a narrative force to something much bigger. Within a split-second when humanity and its most raw emotions are exposed, they are captured. A stillness in chaos.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRIMARY SOURCES

N/A

SECONDARY SOURCES

WEBSITES

<https://www.gettyimages.co.uk/search/2/image?family=editorial&page=2&phrase=chris%20hondros%20liberia&sort=mostpopular&phraseprocessing=excludenaturallanguage>

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/a-soldiers-story-109690958/>

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/jul/23/westafrica.andrewmeldrum>

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2003-07-27/seven-killed-in-monrovia-mortar-attack/1454844>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chris_Hondros

OTHER

Hondros (Documentary)

Liberia: A Fragile Peace (<https://youtu.be/GMX5J58C3uQ?si=2lgBPHOqL4DDAgy0>)

Testament – Chris Hondros (<https://www.chrishondrosfund.org/testament-gallery>)

Photo-Journalism: Developing style in Creative Photography - RotoVision
(<https://www.abebooks.co.uk/9782880465759/Photo-Journalism-Developing-Style-Creative-2880465753/plp>)

World Press Photo 2004 (<https://www.abebooks.co.uk/9780500976333/World-Press-Photo-2004-0500976333/plp>)

<https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-lists/the-last-testament-of-chris-hondros-12456/monrovia-liberia-july-30th-2003-218062/>

<https://petapixel.com/2012/03/20/henri-cartier-bresson-on-the-decisive-moment>

<https://www.nickbeckner.com/blog/10-henri-cartier-bresson-quotes-to-shoot-by>

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Nancy Linihan

WORD COUNT

1767 words