



Franco Pagetti - VII

WAR DOCUMENTARY

How One Photographer Aims to Make Sense of the Iraq War

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More than a movie about Italian photographer Franco Pagetti's work, the short documentary *Shooting War* (23 minutes) is a lesson in practicing critical visual literacy. Beyond the photographer himself, several people chime in, including Alice Gabriner, International Photo Editor at TIME who assigned the VII photographer to cover the war in Iraq from 2003 until the end of 2008, and Sara Farhan, a History Ph.D. candidate at York University in Toronto. As the three of them deconstruct Pagetti's images, layers of meaning are progressively revealed, and several questions regarding the coverage of the conflict emerge.

"Everybody can look at a picture and bring a complete different meaning to it," believes Aeyliya Husain, the movie's director. "The notion that you don't need captions because photography is a universal language is a lie. Without language attached to them, any of these photos could be misinterpreted or used as propaganda. And also, the back-story could be entirely forgotten. Take that photo of Alan Kurdi; it moved millions, and ten years from now, it will be the one people

remember. But, I fear that the events that led to this image, that led to the refugee crisis will be lost."

This fascination for the duality of images – their power to profoundly impact viewers as well as their limitations – drove Husain, who is Iraqi and lives in Toronto, to reach out to photographers who had covered the American intervention in her homeland. The intent: to interrogate the role photos played in our understanding of the situation in the country. She settled on Pagetti because of his unique perspective: "On the one hand, as someone who disagrees with the invasion, he wasn't pandering to the United States' position. Yet, at the same time, since he was embedded with the American army, he wasn't photographing from an Iraqi point of view either. He stood somewhere in the middle," she says.

Not only this, but his work also exposes the theatrics of wars. "The bombs they dropped on the so-called 'green zone' during the first three days, from March 21 to March 23, 2003, were incredibly scenographic," says Pagetti. "There were producing a lot of flames. I felt like I was watching a Hollywood war movie. Once the images of those strikes had graced every magazine cover, the American army seemed to change their style. Bombs were still exploding, but all you would see is some smoke. It was as if the initial strikes were intended for the TV, to show how powerful the United States were." And then, the fighting on the ground began.



U.S. soldiers arrest a group of suspected Madhi Army members, including this man, in the Shi'ite district of Shaab, Baghdad, Iraq, May 28, 2007. The men were accused of kidnapping and killing a Sunni man. Franco Pagetti—VII for TIME

These tensions are explained through commentary on two of the thousands of pictures he produced over the course of six years. The first shows an Iraqi man kneeling against a wall in his

home, surrounded by American soldiers holding him at gunpoint. Reminiscent of Goya's painting "The Third of May 1808" – in which captives are facing a firing squad – the image convey the violence of the moment, while the guns' flashlight resemble a theater spotlight, giving it a surreal feel. In the documentary, Pagetti muses about what the photograph reveals about who – the servicemen – or what – the firearms – holds power, while Farhan considers what it says about the deliberate targeting of able-bodied adult men. The second image focuses on a young boy wailing as his father is taken away by American soldiers to be interrogated. "Though there's no physical destruction, no shooting, no wounded, there's emotional destruction," reflects the veteran photojournalist. This kid will remember that day forever. He knew he was losing something important. He was seeing the collapse of the stability of his future."

Throughout his time in Iraq, Pagetti was hoping to humanize the conflict taking place in what seems to many in the Western hemisphere as a faraway land, in a bid that the public would care more. In many ways, the short documentary continues that work by providing the audience with the tools to interpret what they see in his images.

Franco Pagetti is a photographer based in Italy. He is represented by VII Photo.

Alice Gabriner, who edited this photo essay, is TIME's International Photo Editor.

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