

**POINT OF VIEW —
AFGHANISTAN**

SHAUN GLADWELL



**DOUBLE LOOKING:
SHAUN GLADWELL IN
AFGHANISTAN**
—
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On two opposing screens, near-identical video cameras face off, lens to lens.¹ Synchronised, these two cameras pull back to reveal that they are each in the hands of an Australian soldier, in desert camouflage, with a rifle hanging at his side. We can see immediately that each screen is a point-of-view shot from the opposite soldier's camera. As these two soldiers begin to circle and stalk each other with their cameras, we see the landscape pass behind them: fine powdery sand, the late evening sun, rocky hills, and the buildings of the Australian military base at Tarin Kowt in southern Afghanistan. Throughout this video installation work by Shaun Gladwell, *Double field/Viewfinder (Tarin Kowt)* (hereafter, *Double field*), the two soldier performers see each other only through the digital viewfinders of their cameras.

Gladwell was appointed by the Australian War Memorial as an official war artist in 2009, and spent a month with Australian troops in Afghanistan and the Middle East. Many of the works he produced during and after his deployment look at soldiers looking. In particular, Gladwell explores how Australian soldiers perceive themselves within the Afghan landscape, and how, through the viewfinder, they attempt to make some sense of this unfamiliar land and their place within it. Two works in particular, *Double field* and *BPOV MEAO (Behind point of view, Middle East Area of Operations)*, photographic “portraits” of the back of soldiers’ heads against the landscape, attempt to address what Gladwell calls the “double logic” of the military eye.² Within this trained and habituated vision, the landscape is figured as strange, exotic even, but always superimposed with an ever-shifting tactical layer that is not immediately visible to the civilian, or to the war artist. For many soldiers in war zones today, the camera plays a vital role in their attempts to mitigate the sometimes unbearable psychological tensions presented by this highly charged visual space. During his time in Afghanistan, Gladwell realised the importance of the camera for the troops on the ground: just as a tourist attempts to make familiar a strange place by capturing it within the miniaturising frame of a snapshot, soldiers too attempt to hold and understand these volatile territories within the viewfinder of the camera. Gladwell observes that much of their imaging is focused on looking at “themselves and each other through screens”.³ The camera viewfinder is central to this double looking.⁴

Since the 1960s, when instamatic cameras made photography accessible, affordable and portable, soldiers have increasingly taken their own snapshots: Gladwell recalls seeing his father's own snapshots from the Vietnam War.⁵ With the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, however, we have seen the rise of new “Technologies of Witnessing”, as Meg McLagan calls them.⁶ Anyone with a smart phone, such as an iPhone or Android, possesses the capacity to capture a high-resolution image and distribute it immediately to a potentially massive audience. This has brought about an entirely new set of cultural conditions that is nothing short of a paradigm shift. Within this new paradigm, soldier photography has been elevated to a level similar to that once occupied exclusively by photojournalism. As Mette Mortensen says, a soldier with a camera is “the new eyewitness”.⁷ And, as Liam Kennedy notes, soldiers are distributing these images in large numbers, “some within dedicated web clusters; others in a more ad hoc fashion, and they are creating something new in the process”.⁸ Noel Whitty argues that the rise in digital

technology has converged with a tendency in the “mediated cultures and lifestyles” of western culture “to record, and to visualise, personal experience ... Soldiers, even in war zones, are choosing to experience life ‘through a lens’.”⁹

So, when Gladwell met Australian troops in Afghanistan, he found that his camera equipment initially became common ground and that conversations often followed on from soldiers’ questions about what type of camera he was using.¹⁰ This led Gladwell to experiment with making *Double field*:

I just wanted to hand the cameras over ... I was interested in how people were recording their lives ... in how video, digital photography as well, has a huge role in representing their lives, or even how people would understand their own place in that environment. Like we all do. But it just continues into the war zone. I think that's interesting. We all manically take photos and video and that doesn't stop actually over there.¹¹

Australian soldiers’ preoccupation with taking photographs reminded Gladwell of the snapshots his father had brought back from Vietnam: “As a kid, it was really the first time I had to consider elsewhere or some other place or culture ... they were like tourist photos ... sometimes he managed to frame-out any reference to the war. Of just village life or like a rice field or a very interesting landscape.”¹²

For many of these young soldiers, being sent to Afghanistan was their first encounter with non-Western culture. As Gladwell observes, “these guys were somewhere else for the first time”.¹³ They were immersed in a world where everything is alien – language, culture, climate and landscape. As Kennedy similarly notes in connection with the Coalition troops in Iraq, “touristic imagery has such a widespread presence in the Iraq-based soldier photography that it is suggestive of a strong sense of estrangement from the culture”.¹⁴ Photographing and videoing are ways to assuage this estrangement, to comprehend these alienating worlds, making the strange manageable, within a controllable frame that can capture and convey these worlds on the soldier's own terms.

The “double logic” of seeing the landscape as both exotic and threatening became clear to Gladwell during a patrol from Tarin Kowt to an Australian forward operating base in territory controlled by the Taliban. He recalls riding in a Bushmaster armoured infantry vehicle through an impressive mountain range. Trying to position himself to record the scenery, he was warned by the soldiers accompanying him not to “get too relaxed”. These Australian troops completely understood Gladwell's “initial fascination or wonder with the space; but they had also learned to see it differently”, to “read it as these *other* kind of spaces: that spectacular mountainscape, that big sierra, is a really great strategic point to knock us out”.¹⁵ Gladwell's civilian eye was not trained to see that layer of meaning in the landscape: “I just wasn't thinking on that level.”¹⁶ In that sense, the soldier's way of seeing and reading the landscape is

essentially very different from that of a war artist or an embedded journalist, or indeed, from that of the locals, whether they are allies or adversaries. Whether by design or intuition, Gladwell's attempt to capture something of the military view underlies his decision to hand the cameras over to the soldiers in *Double field*, in order, as he says, to "completely rethink my relationship to recording video or taking photos".¹⁷

Many of Gladwell's works from Afghanistan, then, either attempt to create a visual space for the experience of Australian troops or, to put it another way, allow the troops to picture themselves in Afghanistan through their own way of seeing. The cultural theorist Judith Butler argues that all images of war, whether news media or soldier photography, are subjected to what she calls "the frame".¹⁸ The frame is not just what is literally pictured in an image, it is also the filtering process whereby pre-existing ideas and ideologies enable certain images of war to be taken and transmitted, and then to be understood by those who receive them. News media images often fit the frame; they are recognisable to the journalistic eye as being representable to a mainstream media audience, and so they are. But some images do not fit the frame; they are not easily understood, and so not communicated simply. In Butler's view, "the frame does not simply exhibit reality, but actively participates in a strategy of containment, selectively producing and enforcing what will count as reality".¹⁹ The net result of this filtering is a picture of war that is comprehensible and coherent to its audience back home. However, the frame is also a dynamic cultural space. Sometimes certain images violently intrude into the frame, such as the Abu Ghraib photographs, becoming "de-realizing and de-legitimizing alternative versions of reality" that, Butler argues, can come back to haunt the "official version" as points of resistance within the frame.²⁰ The vast majority of soldiers' images of war zones are much more about everyday activities and relationships, yet they still sit uneasily in the frame and resist the familiar picture of war. Often we, the audience, do not quite know how to read this mass of soldier-produced images, as Kennedy says, "we have yet to learn to see it and to understand it".²¹ We do not see the layers in the landscape that are apparent to the military gaze.

In many of his works after Afghanistan, Gladwell attempts to give us the soldiers' point of view, both literally and psychologically. In so doing, *Double field* and *BPOV MEAO* attempt to open a new space within the frame for points of view that are often overlooked because they are not easily understood, enfranchising those who risk the most in war by giving them a visual "voice" that we might begin to understand.

- 1 In *Double field*, one channel is recorded using a Sony HVR-Z1 video camera, the other with a Sony PMW-EX3 – the Z1 has a squared hood, the EX3 more rounded sides. Gladwell likens these slight variations in models to the variations and modifications that soldiers make to their standard-issue rifles. Gladwell, interview with Kit Messham-Muir, 12 June 2010.
- 2 Gladwell, interview with Kit Messham-Muir, Paddington, Sydney, 26 April 2010 (transcribed by Susan Cairns).
- 3 Gladwell, interview with Kit Messham-Muir, Paddington, Sydney, 12 June 2010 (transcribed by Susan Cairns).
- 4 Gladwell, interview with Kit Messham-Muir, 26 April 2010.
- 5 Gladwell, interview with Kit Messham-Muir, 26 April 2010.
- 6 Meg McLagan, "Introduction: making human rights claims public", *American Anthropologist*, 108:1 (2006), 191–95.
- 7 Mette Mortensen, "The camera at war: when soldiers become war photographers", in Rikke Schubart, Fabian Virchow, Tanja Thomas and Debra White-Stanley (eds), *War isn't hell, it's entertainment*, (McFarland & Co: Jefferson NC and London, 2009), 46.
- 8 Liam Kennedy, "Soldier photography: visualising the war in Iraq," *Review of International Studies*, 35 (2009), 819.
- 9 Noel Whitty, "Soldier photography of detainee abuse in Iraq: digital technology, human rights and the death of Baha Mousa," *Human Rights Law Review*, 10:4 (2010), 691.
- 10 Gladwell, interview with Kit Messham-Muir, Paddington, Sydney, 30 September 2010 (transcribed by Susan Cairns).
- 11 Gladwell, interview with Kit Messham-Muir, 30 September 2010.
- 12 Gladwell, interview with Kit Messham-Muir, 26 April 2010.
- 13 Gladwell, interview with Kit Messham-Muir, 26 April 2010.
- 14 Kennedy, "Soldier photography: visualising the war in Iraq", 826.
- 15 Gladwell, interview with Kit Messham-Muir, 26 April 2010.
- 16 Gladwell, interview with Kit Messham-Muir, 26 April 2010.
- 17 Gladwell, interview with Kit Messham-Muir, 30 September 2010.
- 18 Judith Butler, *Precarious life: the powers of mourning and violence*, (London & New York: Verso, 2004); Judith Butler, *Frames of war: when is life grievable?* (London & New York: Verso, 2010).
- 19 Butler, *Frames of war*, xiii.
- 20 Butler, *Frames of war*, xiii.
- 21 Kennedy, "Soldier photography: visualising the war in Iraq", 833.

Logistics run through the Dasht
to Patrol Base Wall

—
one in a series of photographic studies
acquired under the official war art scheme in 2009
collection of the Australian War Memorial
P09777.030





BPOV MEAO
(behind point of view,
Middle East Area of Operations)

—
edition 1/1, 2009–10
digital colour photograph
inkjet on paper
image size: 95.0 x 63.3 cm
acquired under the official war art scheme in 2010
collection of the Australian War Memorial
P10015.001



BPOV MEAO
(behind point of view,
Middle East Area of Operations)

—
edition 1/1, 2009–10
digital colour photograph
inkjet on paper
image size: 95.0 x 63.3 cm
acquired under the official war art scheme in 2010
collection of the Australian War Memorial
P10015.002



BPOV MEAO
(behind point of view,
Middle East Area of Operations)

—
edition 1/1, 2009–10
digital colour photograph
inkjet on paper
image size: 95.0 x 63.3 cm
acquired under the official war art scheme in 2010
collection of the Australian War Memorial
P10015.003



BPOV MEAO
(behind point of view,
Middle East Area of Operations)

—
edition 1/1, 2009–10
digital colour photograph
inkjet on paper
image size: 95.0 x 63.3 cm
acquired under the official war art scheme in 2010
collection of the Australian War Memorial
P10015.004



BPOV MEAO
(behind point of view,
Middle East Area of Operations)

—
edition 1/1, 2009–10
digital colour photograph
inkjet on paper
image size: 95.0 x 63.3 cm
acquired under the official war art scheme in 2010
collection of the Australian War Memorial
P10015.005



BPOV MEAO
(behind point of view,
Middle East Area of Operations)

—
edition 1/1, 2009–10
digital colour photograph
inkjet on paper
image size: 95.0 x 63.3 cm
acquired under the official war art scheme in 2010
collection of the Australian War Memorial
P10015.006



BPOV MEAO
(behind point of view,
Middle East Area of Operations)

—
edition 1/1, 2009–10
digital colour photograph
inkjet on paper
image size: 95.0 x 63.3 cm
acquired under the official war art scheme in 2010
collection of the Australian War Memorial
P10015.007



BPOV MEAO
(behind point of view,
Middle East Area of Operations)

—
edition 1/1, 2009–10
digital colour photograph
inkjet on paper
image size: 95.0 x 63.3 cm
acquired under the official war art scheme in 2010
collection of the Australian War Memorial
P10015.008



BPOV MEAO
(behind point of view,
Middle East Area of Operations)

—
edition 1/1, 2009–10
digital colour photograph
inkjet on paper
image size: 95.0 x 63.3 cm
acquired under the official war art scheme in 2010
collection of the Australian War Memorial
P10015.009



BPOV MEAO
(behind point of view,
Middle East Area of Operations)

—
edition 1/1, 2009–10
digital colour photograph
inkjet on paper
image size: 95.0 x 63.3 cm
acquired under the official war art scheme in 2010
collection of the Australian War Memorial
P10015.010



POV mirror sequence (Tarin Kowt)
 [video still]

—
 edition 1/1, 2009–10
 2 channel synchronised
 HD video, stereo audio, 16:9
 8 minutes, 22 seconds
 acquired under the official war art scheme in 2012
 collection of the Australian War Memorial
 ART94193

Bomb clearance, Kandahar Air Field

—
one in a series of photographic studies
acquired under the official war art scheme in 2009
collection of the Australian War Memorial
P09777.007



**GLADWELL EXPLORES
HOW AUSTRALIAN
SOLDIERS PERCEIVE
THEMSELVES WITHIN
THE AFGHAN LANDSCAPE,
AND HOW, THROUGH
THE VIEWFINDER, THEY
ATTEMPT TO MAKE
SOME SENSE OF
THIS UNFAMILIAR
LAND AND THEIR PLACE
WITHIN IT.**

— Kit Messham-Muir, 2013

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COLOPHON

Cover: *POV mirror sequence (Tarin Kowl)* photographic production still
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