

Tim Hetherington

In his short career Tim Hetherington helped shape a change in our understanding of conflict reporting. Working with an expanded vision that stretched far beyond describing the drama of action he invited his audience to place themselves in a world that is continuously connected from viewer to protagonist.

The inventory of Tim Hetherington's work and awards tells the story of an intrepid journalist and filmmaker who covered conflict and human rights issues at the highest levels; he was recognized as a committed human rights activist and a visionary for the issues he covered and an innovator in the media he used to describe what he saw. But like the proverbial iceberg, everything that we saw above the waterline was defined by something greater, a ballast of intelligence and curiosity that drove him to explore new territories and more importantly to revisit subjects that were seemingly familiar yet poorly understood. Often described as a conflict photographer, Hetherington's mission was never so simple. "Trying to understand my own fascination with conflict and war has become something that's started to focus on what it means to be a man. What is it about war that really draws men?" Never selfishly obsessed but always acutely self aware, Hetherington was intensely focused on understanding the issues underlying the subjects he investigated and with sharing his insights with the wider world. "My work is all about building bridges between me and the audience" he said shortly before his death in 2011.

The awards and recognition that came to him as he approached 40 might have indicated to some that he had arrived, but for Hetherington this was just the beginning. In the fifteen years after graduating from Cardiff University he had found his voice and with the world paying attention he was ready to start his journey in earnest.

His family talks about a child that was playful yet intense, perpetually curious and seeking new experiences, pushing the proper boundaries of an English adolescence, characteristics that later served him well as a journalist. His education was an eclectic mix of state and private Catholic schooling followed by three years at Oxford University studying classics and English and two years traveling India, China and Tibet. On returning to UK in 1992 he spent several years teaching himself photography before matriculating to Cardiff University, graduating in 1997 with a degree in photojournalism. It was here that he first explored the possibilities of mixing photography with video and audio, which became a tantalizing and frustrating obsession in a world that wasn't yet ready for multimedia. Hetherington was undeterred by the lack of distribution and he persistently rehearsed his pioneering approach in privately circulated multimedia pieces and even an innovative photography book dummy that was printed in brail, and ultimately blossomed into the film work that culminated in his Academy nomination for "Restrepo" in 2010. Even as he walked the red carpet he was working on the next innovation and later in 2010 he self-published "Diary", an extraordinary manifesto of documentary narrative in a new form that broke the conventions of linear story-telling, mixing time and geography between West Africa and West London in a stream of dreams and brutal reality. The promise offered by this groundbreaking work was for a new form of factual narrative in an almost fictional form that could describe the subconscious drivers behind visible actions, seamlessly weaving the ordinary with the extraordinary and bringing distant events very close to home.

Meanwhile the early years were spent working in London for The Big Issue magazine and The Independent newspaper when he was also accepted as a member of the prestigious Network photo agency. With his career taking shape as a photojournalist he continued to experiment with alternative forms of storytelling as a means to expand the limits of the traditional news agenda. The factual format of “who, what, where and when” had to embrace the extra element “why” and over the years Hetherington’s output grew to include photography, film, audio, writing, exhibitions in many formats, books, mobile apps and other means to harness the media to his message.

In 1999 he took his first assignment in Sierra Leone and spent most of the next eight years living in West Africa, working with students at the Milton Margai school for the blind in Sierra Leone and aspiring sports students, not only documenting their lives but facilitating their development. It was never enough to simply witness events, he had to experience the lives of his subjects. This is how he came to live through the second Liberian civil war that ended in 2003 with extraordinary access to the rebel forces and unprecedented understanding of their culture and motives, which interested him as much as the facts of their actions. It was this insight and passion that subsequently qualified him to work with the United Nations Security Council as an investigator for the Liberia Sanctions Committee.

In 2007 he accepted an assignment from Vanity Fair to work with writer Sebastian Junger to document the American campaign in the Korengal Valley, Afghanistan. Typically the assignment became a way of life as Hetherington shared every aspect of the battalion’s experience including injury and a two-day march on a broken ankle to evacuate the country. He later returned and the assignment extended into a two-year study that resulted in an astonishing array of work that included traditional coverage of “kinetic warfare” and a profound study of fighting men in the multi-screen multimedia project “Sleeping Soldiers”, a fly-poster exhibition, the book “Infidel” and the feature documentary “Restrepo”. Always frustrated by the limitations of conventional reportage he was developing a creative strategy to document the Afghan conflict using the visual tropes of science fiction as a means to engage his audience in a deeper narrative about the nature of war.

Speaking about his fascination with conflict Hetherington said, “The truth is that the war machine is the software, as much as the hardware. The software runs it and the software is young men and that’s really what my work is about. In some ways part of the software; I was a young man once, I’m not so young any more but I get it, I get the operating system. I am the operating system,”

Tim Hetherington’s war was peculiarly personal. It was a process of self-discovery, an inner journey by a man of great intelligence whose self-aware adventures reflected bigger truths. While he appreciated the success that brought him an audience he was equally frustrated by the limitations that came with it. “People want you to play the role. There’s very little room for nuance and it’s easy just to agree and to accept the stereotype. I find myself pushed into the role of being this heroic figure.”

And yet he was a hero, not only in the conventional sense of bravery in the field but in his courage to face himself. “I don’t know many other straight men discussing

masculinity, yet defining your masculinity is part of the process of war. The actual action of going is as important as what comes out.”

And so he went, one last time. Hetherington died in 2011 aged 40 while covering the Libyan civil war.

Tim's quotes drawn from a recorded conversation March 12 2011, five weeks before his final trip to Libya.

Stephen Mayes
Executive Director of Tim Hetherington Charitable Trust
November 2012