Introduction: Art, War, and Truth – Images of Conflict

MARGARET HUTCHISON¹ AND EMILY ROBERTSON²

¹ Australian National University, Australia
² University of New South Wales, Canberra, Australia

While destructive, war is a generative force like no other. (Barkawi & Brighton, 2011: 126)

War is both ‘a destroyer and maker of truths’, and it is not just through history and politics that these certainties are generated and extinguished, but also in art (Barkawi & Brighton, 2011: 127). Visual art has a longstanding relationship with war and continues to play a fundamental role in both condemning and promoting conflict. Wars have provoked numerous and diverse representations from which have arisen competing notions of the ‘truth’; these conflicting ideas of truth have often bled into the political sphere, impacting on how conflicts are remembered. This special issue of the Journal of War and Culture Studies explores the various ways in which art has been used to convey a variety of ‘truths’ about conflict – not just political truths in which art is utilized to position a conflict within national narratives, but also more complex truths: the ethical responsibilities of being an observer and image-maker, the impact of war upon one’s homeland, and the cultural symbols which have been used to interpret a conflict. The four contributors to the special feature examine the manner in which war has been depicted across time and place, from the Black War of the early nineteenth century in Tasmania, to the consequences of the First World War in 1920s Italy, to the Battle of Nomonhan in Mongolia in 1939, and finally the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan in the twenty-first century. These articles show that art has been an important cultural constant in how war has been understood. Further, art has had a fundamental role in privileging some ideals of ‘truth’ over others, thus drawing attention to the difficulty of ascribing one ‘truth’ of war over another.

In order to encompass the complexity of war and its relationship with ‘truth’, theorists Brighton and Barkawi propose that it be studied as ‘a complex of relations between war, knowledge and power’, which they have called ‘War/Truth’. As they argue, this term ‘enables the tracing of the intimacy between the battlefield and the wider social, political, and cultural field war helps constitute’ (Brighton and Barkawi, 127). The influence of the war zone on culture is particularly apparent...
in the ebb and flow between events that take place on the battlefield and their portrayal by artists, whether present at the front or painting later from accounts of battle.

In the past 40 years, scholars have traced the effect of war on artists’ style, and how these evolutions in artistic modes of expression have influenced the manner in which war is remembered. In doing so, they have examined not just the narratives that art has produced about war, but also the generative influence of war itself. In his study *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell explores the impact of trench warfare on style and expression. He shows that while poets such as Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon were influenced to some extent by inherited templates, they also developed new approaches to representing conflict in their work (Fussell, 1975). Fussell’s argument about the Great War as a creator of new artistic expression is supported by scholars such as Samuel Hynes who contend that in searching for ‘a style in which it would be possible to tell the truth about war’, artists and writers alike created ‘a new kind of war painting’ that ‘put the innovations of pre-war Modern movements to new uses – to creating versions of war that were truth-telling’ (Hynes, 1990: 166). However, the argument of the Great War as a catalyst for radical change in culture has been challenged by Jay Winter. In his book *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, Winter argues instead that traditional symbols and modes of expression persisted throughout the conflict across a range of artistic media (Winter, 1995). Yet Winter does not dismiss the role of war in generating new cultural forms, but rather ‘relocates the watershed’ to the Second World War (Ash-plant et al., 2009: 36). Thus, scholarly engagements with the modes of representation that arguably emerge as a result of war are often centred on their ‘truth’ telling or, in Winter’s case, their meaning-making capacities in relation to the experience of war.

Whether drawing on inherited narrative and visual templates or creating new modes of expression to represent conflict, artists’ images of war contribute to broader public narratives. Brandon suggests that, ‘We expect war art to be truthful […] in so many cases, after all, the artist was there’ (Brandon, 2007: 7). Yet the idea that war art is purely documentary, or representational, and that artists must act only as these eyewitness to conflict, overlooks the conditions which inform the production of these images. Questions therefore need to be asked about the context in which war art is produced: for whom do artists create their images, how do they negotiate and interpret their presence at or absence from the battlefront? How does the form in which they choose to portray conflict shape – and potentially reshape – popular perceptions of war? For artists creating publically commissioned works, they must navigate between what their patrons want, what the public expects, and their own judgement about how best to depict conflict in their work and what ‘truth’ or ‘truths’ to represent. As Charles Green, Lyndell Brown, and John Cattapan show in their article in this special issue, these questions and tensions inform and shape contemporary official artists’ responses to creating images of
conflict and its consequences. The nature of officially commissioned art is also examined here in Aya Louisa McDonald’s article, which explores the various representations of war and its ‘truths’ presented in Tsuguharu Fujita’s paintings of the Battle of Nomonhan – one painting being official, the other intriguingly ambiguous.

Yet in the same way as art constructs or reconstructs dominant narratives of war, it can also question or unsettle them. As Timothy Ashplant et al. argue, ‘Even while artistic media may seem to be operating within terms of conventional public fictions, they may still create spaces for the representation of otherwise hidden dimensions’ (Ashplant et al., 37). War images are often contested, and this results in various meanings being imposed upon or derived from them regardless of artists’ intentions. As examined in Anthony White’s article, artists can at one time unsettle or alter dominant narratives. By exploring the consequences of war on the home front and ideas of identity artists tease out the tension between national tropes and a sense of dislocation with place. However, in other instances, their work can be used in support of conflict. This theme is explored further in Gregory Lehman’s article which demonstrates the way that new and more deeply analytical interpretations of artists’ work can destabilize national narratives by showing long existing but overlooked anxieties about the effects of war.

The four articles in this special feature emerged from papers delivered at a conference on ‘Art, War, and Truth’, organized by Margaret Hutchison and Emily Robertson at the Australian National University in 2014, which drew together academics, museum curators, and art practitioners who examined the various ways in which art has been used to construct and convey a ‘truth’, or ‘truths’, of war. The articles explore several of the central issues raised at the conference regarding the interplay between war and art, such as how political responses to events on the battlefront impact upon the way artists represent conflict, how artists themselves have dealt with the tension and often dislocation between the battlefront and the home front in their work, and the insight art can provide into the destabilizing effects of war upon national narratives.

White’s article considers the consequences of conflict on place and identity through an examination of how Italian futurist Fortunato Depero’s perception of his birthplace in Trentino was changed by the events of the First World War. While Depero’s later work was, in White’s words, part of a ‘war-mongering ideological program’, his textile works like *Serrada* (1920) reveal a more complex approach to war. As part of a move towards ‘more traditional, national conceptions of art’, *Serrada* initially appears to be a scene of rustic peacefulness. However, as White points out, even some contemporary critics perceived an uneasy mechanical quality to the people in the work. *Serrada* in fact alluded to the mechanized, dehumanized bodies of the wounded returned soldiers that Depero had portrayed in his 1918 work *Balli plastici*. Moreover, the work had a surreal and disturbing quality to it, one which White ascribes to Depero’s sense of distance from the landscape and countryside following the bombing not only of nearby Rovereto, but many other
towns in northern Italy. Furthermore, the bizarre marionette figures who inhabited the original border ‘had the capacity to remind viewers of the mechanization that took place in the industrialized forms of warfare during the First World War’. Thus while Depero’s later works move to ebullient celebrations of violence – Guerra = festa (‘War = festival’) with its fantastic depiction of joyful bloodshed is an ideal example – his work of the 1920s portrayed ‘the geographic, cultural and personal dislocation brought about by military conflict’.

McDonald investigates the complex relationship between art and the plurality of truths about war in her article on Tsuguharu Fujita’s two paintings of the Battle of Nomonhan, which were created one year after the catastrophic defeat of Japanese forces by Soviet forces along the Manchurian/Mongolian border in 1939. The extant painting depicts a brief period in the conflict during which the Japanese achieved a minor triumph. This version of the battle, observes McDonald, has a calm quality, ‘the black pillars of smoke and fires under burning Soviet tanks are too distant to disturb us’. McDonald asks of this eerily peaceful depiction: given ‘the brevity of these moments of Japanese triumph […] does it represent an untruth, or are we saved by the artist’s licence to construct a composite, multi-layered truth?’ Fujita’s lost painting was very different, reportedly depicting maggot-covered corpses and Soviet tanks crushing the Japanese soldiers ‘like insects’. This was the scene of Japanese defeat. McDonald uses these two remarkably different paintings to draw out the various political and religious elements that led to the commissioning of the works, and also to comment on the nature of public art; where Fujita’s extant painting of Japanese triumph was for public consumption, the one of Japan’s ignominious defeat was not. Rather than directing the reader as to which painting depicted the ultimate truth of the battle, McDonald invites us instead to contemplate how these different ‘truths’ inhabited the political and cultural world of Japan just one year before it entered the Second World War.

In his article ‘Benjamin Duterrau: the Art of Conciliation’, Lehman explores the tensions inherent in paintings which represent the treaties that aim to bring peace at the conclusion of war. By tracing the context within which Duterrau produced The Conciliation (1840) and the artistic influences that informed his representation of the treaty to end the Black War, Lehman teases out this conceptually complex image, examining its ambiguous character and the subsequent interpretations of the canvas, both historic and contemporary. He argues that the painting can be read as an early expression of an anxiety or unease about the conclusion of the Black War. In particular, he contends that the differing ‘readings’ of The Conciliation are linked both to various understandings of Australian national identity, and to different ways that the Black War in Tasmania in the early nineteenth century have been interpreted over the years. More broadly, in exploring the various meanings that were and are – and have the potential to be – imposed upon or derived from the image, the article engages with the complex role of art as a site of social
remembering and the influence a deeper reading of a canvas might have, even altering understandings of a nation’s past to shape contemporary and future events.

Australian official artists Green, Brown, and Cattapan investigate how artists negotiate their role as creators of war images in their article ‘The Obscure Dimensions of Conflict: Three Contemporary War Artists Speak’. Framed within the context of international movements of war art and drawing on their own experience as official artists in Iraq, Afghanistan, Timor-Leste, Libya, and Syria, they explore the issues contemporary artists face in producing conflict art. In particular, Green, Brown, and Cattapan reveal the moral and ethical questions they considered when making publicly commissioned art in war zones and in the aftermath of conflict, such as how to avoid ‘glamorizing the illusory agency of action’. Further, they examine how they sought to resolve the tension between creating images that might reshape or alter public understandings of war, and the public’s expectation of a political national narrative in official images of conflict. Their decision to draw on established traditions in war art and, in their words, ‘emphasize the absence of conventional action in the scenes or landscapes’ as a way of depicting ‘the loss of effective agency’ in modern conflict, reveals the complexities of making contemporary images that go beyond merely witnessing conflict or representing it.

This special feature of the *Journal of War and Culture Studies* seeks to stimulate discussion about the relationship between war and art by bringing together original research on the topic of images and their representation of conflict. By doing so, it contributes further insight into war art – both its production and its interpretation – through the inclusion of both academics and practitioners. We hope that these four articles will encourage further discussion on this subject, particularly as war art continues to occupy such a central position in both shaping and unsettling the shifting parameters of how the truths of a conflict are defined in the twenty-first century.

In addition to the articles collected in this special feature on the theme of art, war, and truth which reflect current scholarship presented within the Australian context, we also include in this issue a *varia* article. The aim of all our *varia* publications is to provide an opportunity for war and culture scholars to access the broad range of research areas currently covered by the discipline. Our most recent *varia* articles shared recurrent themes of the blurred boundaries and complex identities which the experience of war and its aftermath produce for those experiencing very different types of war in diverse geographical spaces, and the ways in which those experiences are expressed. Kate Lemay, in the final article here, “‘No Vain Glory’: Militarism and Art in the American War Cemeteries in France” explores aspects of public commemorative art in post-war France and America and considers both politicians and public audiences negotiating the commemoration of war, and the pivotal role that art and material culture may play in that act. In so doing, she provides a link between those earlier themes and the themes embodied in the types of questions
raised by placing the terms ‘art’, ‘war’, and ‘truth’ together as Margaret Hutchison and Emily Robertson argue above. *The Journal of War and Culture Studies* welcomes this intervention by two young scholars whose own research, interests, and energy have given rise to the theme of this special feature.

**References**


**Notes on contributor**

**Margaret Hutchison** is a PhD candidate in the School of History at the Australian National University. Her research focusses on the construction of memory in Australia’s First World War official art scheme from 1914 to 1939. She has taught and published on war art and the First World War and is the recipient of several grants and awards including a Russell F. Weigley Award and an International Council for Canadian Studies Grant. Email: margaret.hutchison@anu.edu.au

**Emily Robertson** is a PhD candidate at the University of New South Wales, Canberra. Her thesis explores the myths and ‘truths’ about First World War atrocity propaganda in Great Britain and Australia. She first became interested in the topic of propaganda while working as a poster curator with Art Section of the Australian War Memorial. She has published on the topic of propaganda and also has received several grants, including the Australian Bicentennial Award from the Menzies Centre at King’s College, London. Email: e.robertson@adfa.edu.au

**Debra Kelly** is professor of French and Francophone Literary and Cultural Studies at the University of Westminster and a founding editor of the *Journal of War and Culture Studies*. Email: kellyd@westminster.ac.uk