The Structure of Shame

Stephan van Fleteren's Portrait of the Kosovo War

1.

I don't even need to look at the photo any more – gentle hills and the small lake on the left (Ireland, you think, clouds and all); two fifths of the picture generously endowed with peace; on the right a pick-up truck. There are neither wheels nor cab, but you know they are sitting in a truck – the wooden sides, the hinge, the tarpaulin. Peace shattered now. Three women, a cascade of wool and felt and velvet; three women, one pair of eyes; folds of fabric, folds of skin; a gaze I hardly dare return. I don't need to look at the photo any more, but I do anyway.

2.

The photo was taken in the spring of 1999, close to the Albanian town of Kükes. The women are Albanian Kosovars, fleeing from the violence that has hit their province so severely since the start of the air attacks. On 24 March 1999, NATO began to bomb Serbian targets, military ones first, then civilian ones as well. For the first time in its fifty-year existence the most powerful military alliance in the world attacks a sovereign country, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The reason given was that it was to prevent – or put an end to? – a new humanitarian catastrophe in the Balkans. President Slobodan Milošević's regime is suspected of yet another series of crimes against humanity, this time directed at the rebellious province of Kosovo. Once Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Macedonia have split away there is not much left of Tito's unitary Yugoslavia save Serbia, the adjacent constituent republic of Montenegro and the province of Kosovo. From 1995 on the (mainly Albanian-speaking) Kosovars' struggle for autonomy has become an ever greater thorn in Serbian flesh. Once a small-scale ethnic Albanian guerrilla group, the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), has overtaken the informally elected President Ibrahim Rugova's pacifist nationalism, the behaviour of the Serbian militias has become more and more violent. International observers watch the murderous attacks and reprisals with eagle eyes. After the civil wars, ethnic cleansing and genocides in Croatia and Bosnia, the West no longer wants to stand by impotently and watch as human rights are flagrantly

Photo by Stephan Vanfleteren.

and systematically violated on the eve of the third millennium. The international community arrived too late in Rwanda and pulled out of Srebrenica too soon. It was not going to happen this time. The NATO bombardments were supposed to persuade Milošević to accept the Rambouillet peace initiative (which gave Kosovo more autonomy, but no independence for the time being). In practice, however, the air attacks gave the Serbian army carte blanche to plunder and murder with impunity in Kosovo. As a result, in the first few weeks of the war more than nine hundred thousand Kosovars fled, half the then population of Kosovo. It was the biggest exodus since the Second World War.

3.

All of this happened six years ago, but the illustrated supplement is engraved on my memory. It was published on 24 April 1999, exactly one month after the first bombs, as a special section to the Flemish newspaper *De Morgen*. The design was sober and serene, semi-matte paper, quarto format, black and white photos, framed only by the edges of the negative. In-house photographer Stephan Vanfleteren had been to cover the refugee camps in Albania and his poignant photos told the whole story. There was hardly any text. Apart from a brief introduction by Koen Vidal the photos were accompanied only by a handful of short quotes from the refugees themselves – gruesome stories of Serbian abuses, missing family members and endless despair. An international observer was also quoted, his neutrality a guarantee of objectivity: '*Right now the Serbs are doing what they're good at.*'

The photo was on the centrefold, spread across two pages. I do not know how long I looked at it, but what I do remember is disillusion, so immense, so furious that it had to be masking a deeper sorrow.

On the back of the page, as some kind of relief, was an account number for the Help Kosovo campaign.

4.

I have meant to write about that photo for several years, about its disturbing composition, that eerie landscape, that still life with sorrow. I was going to write about Vanfleterens' overexposure and how it sculpts the foreground, about his ingenious use of depth-of-field (just look at the edge of the tailboard, I would say, and notice how narrow the zone is where the photo is sharp); and about how that draws your gaze from the handkerchief and fine wrinkles of the woman in the middle to the paler eyes on the right in front, to end on that one razor-sharp earring. I would write about dignity and how it is epitomised by an elderly lady who wears mother-of-pearl earrings even as she flees. That is what I was going to write, that is still what I would like to write, but the longer I wait, the harder it becomes. Not that the photo has lost any of its effect, far from it, but because something else has changed: the world, the way I look at it – my appreciation of beauty, what moves me, touches me.

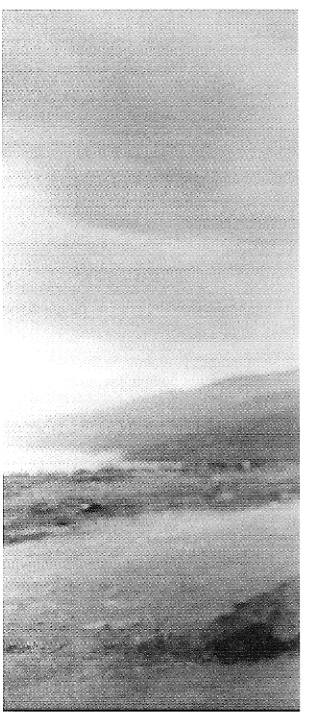
The photo hangs on my wall. Over the last few years I have not only looked at it every day, I have also started to look at it differently. If I can no longer report on what I experienced when I first saw it, without a feeling of perversion, then perhaps I can still try to chronicle the changing way I view it. In doing so, photographic analysis and pictorial aesthetics give way to retrospection and international politics.

5.

I remember how I viewed the war then – as a moral dilemma. Was it justified to attack a sovereign nation for the sake of human rights? Was it justified to use massive and indisputable military superiority against a vicious, but inferior army? Was it legitimate to use violence to enforce human rights? Could a mili-

tary intervention have humanitarian motives? I remember exhaustive discussions with friends and colleagues about it, but the answer to these questions often came close to a hesitant 'yes'. We chided an older colleague who invoked territorial integrity and the right of the nation state to self-determination, with arguments about post-national Europe, the intolerableness of tribal violence and the need for a new, international, moral order. *'Wouldn't just a little bit of war be better?'* sang Flemish rock singer Stijn Meuris.

No, we were not in favour of violence and our lofty ideals certainly did not include a readiness to die, but somehow or other we agreed with the Dutch Minister Van Aartsen when, during a hastily summoned emergency debate, he informed the Second Chamber *'with the greatest possible regret'* that the war had begun. With the exception of the far left-wing SP fraction the whole Chamber endorsed the campaign. GroenLinks (the left-wing environmental party) called it *'the most difficult decision of the past year'*.[1] The Netherlands and Belgium would supply a combined squadron of 26 fighter aircraft for the air offensive. The Belgian Federal Government kept its promises as a NATO ally with few complaints. The then Minister of Foreign Affairs, Derycke, said: *'We are a member of NATO, the most solid alliance which everyone wants to join and which is wanted by all. That entails obligations. I am fairly optimistic that the population understands the theory of rights and obligations and can accept it.'*[2] Derycke was right about public opinion. Only days after the outbreak of war an editorial in *De Morgen* warned against *'an endless spiral of violence'*, but the legitimacy of NATO's action was not questioned.[3] The leader-writer of the more conservative newspaper, *De Standaard*, went a step further and stated frankly: *'Occasionally, very occasionally, military aggression is all that we have left to defend legitimate collective interests.'*[4] A moral dilemma, yes, a struggle to resolve, but eventually we got there.

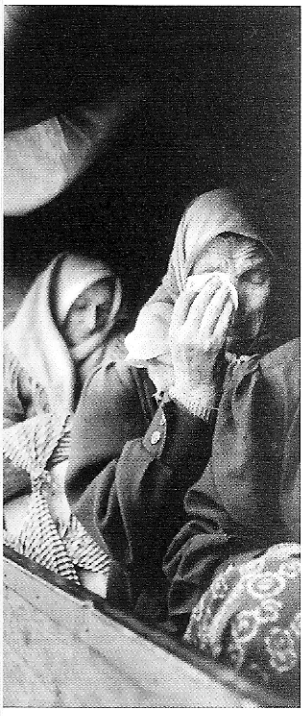


Those were the nineties; the decade that didn't belong to any particular century because the twentieth century was over and the twenty-first had yet to begin; that remarkable period between 1989 and 2001, between the fall of the Wall and the fall of the Twin Towers, between the end of the Cold War and the start of the War on Terror; the decade in which 'the end of history' was prematurely announced because the combination of parliamentary democracy and free-market economics had surfaced as the best, definitive type of state; the decade of the Third Way in Britain, the active welfare state in Belgium, the Dutch *poldermodel*, the French *cohabitation*, the German *neue Mitte* and other appealing attempts at reconciliation between socialism and neo-liberalism that have since been exposed as fake marriages. With the Twenties and the Sixties, the Nineties were undoubtedly amongst the gayest decades of the twentieth century – they too came shortly after the end of a war, albeit a cold one. This time too, everything would be different. Economics would become social, politics consensual, and war humanitarian.

6.

How very different from the present state of affairs! Compared to the moral and political complexity of the war in Kosovo, the Second Gulf War seems like a piece of cake as far as ethics are concerned. The blatant economic and geopolitical interests, the flimsy and contrived *casus belli*, the unabashed imperial-

ism, the boundless unilateral arrogance, the voluntaristic religious discourse – it is all a very long way from what happened in Kosovo five years ago. The NATO intervention was a lot of things, but certainly not a struggle for oil and minerals. The Serbian army did commit humanitarian crimes (though the extent of them is unclear, and yes, so did Saddam, and on a much larger scale, but that was not Bush and Co.'s motive for war). At the time, the military coalition was considerably larger than the present 'coalition of the willing' (although there was no UN mandate then either) and the motivation was universal humanism, not sectarian religion. To put it cynically, since March 2003 you might look at Vanfleteren's photo almost with nostalgia. Those women belong to another era now. The woman on the right – she must have been eighty or ninety even then – was experiencing her third war and has, in all probability, passed on in the meantime. However great her suffering, you could say it still took place within the framework of a humanitarian intervention. Today the world in which that photo was taken no longer exists; that world order seems gone forever. I still look at her, but she doesn't very often look back now. The moral dilemma of those days seems to have been surpassed by the absurd stupidity of today.



7.

On 24 March 1999 there was a meeting of the American Senate. On the agenda was a small but important point – compensation for the victims of the ski lift accident in Cavalese.

At about exactly the same moment, around seven local time, forty fighter planes and bombers took off from Aviano, in Northern Italy, heading for Kosovo. Aviano is NATO's most important European air force base. North Africa, the Middle East and Eastern Europe are within easy reach by plane. It is less than half an hour's flight to the Balkans. American Air Force pilots serving with the SFOR operations in Bosnia even use the Italian Alps as a training ground for the mountainous Balkans. A year earlier, however, things had gone wrong. During an exercise, on 3 February 1998, an American reconnaissance plane from Aviano cut through the cables of a large ski lift in the nearby town of Cavalese. The crew were ten kilometres off course, at extremely low altitude, and had just executed a number of unscheduled stunts. For years the inhabitants of Cavalese had been complaining about the cowboy antics of fighter pilots who would dive under the cable for a laugh – but to no avail. On 3 February the ski lift's gondola tumbled a hundred metres to the ground. All twenty passengers were killed .

To great consternation in Europe, a year later the pilot of the plane was acquitted by an American military tribunal. That was one month before the start of the war in Kosovo. So great was the sense of outrage that President Clinton had to try and smooth things over in continental Europe. It is not insignificant that all the victims came from NATO member states (Germany, Austria, Italy, the Netherlands and Belgium) or would-be members (Poland).

On the day the Aviano air base served as the take-off point for the war in Kosovo, the day the US fully grasped the importance of a military presence on the continent of Europe, the day the US had every reason to want a good relationship with its NATO allies, on that day the American Senate met to vote on a sum of 40 million dollars as compensation for the relatives of the Cavalese accident victims.[5] For months there had been haggling about who should pay,

Italy or the US, and how much. Now, suddenly, it was all wrapped up, and the size of the settlement was described in the evening news on Flemish television as *'an absurd amount for an absurd accident'*. Absurd, yes, unless one assumes a link between the exorbitant amount of compensation and the importance the US attaches to transatlantic cohesion.

No, the war in Kosovo was not directly about economic interests, but to draw the conclusion that the deployment *must* therefore have been strictly humanitarian is categorically wrong.[6] Since the fall of communism, in 1989, the military alliance between the US and Western Europe had been stripped of its primary raison d'être. *'New military humanism'*, as Noam Chomsky called it, offered NATO a new reason to carry on, regardless of the integrity of some of its convinced supporters.[7] A successful, highly technological intervention, without victims on NATO's side, would be the best recommendation for a renewed mission – and for America to continue to keep a foot in the European door. The opposite was true, too, and was strikingly summarised by White House advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski: *'The failure of NATO (in Kosovo) would mean the end of the Alliance's credibility, as well as a weakening of American* leadership in the world.'[8] For that credibility and leadership, the American Senate was quite willing to hand out some compensation.

8.

Stephan Vanfleteren's photos left us in no doubt. In the context of the discourse about the horror of ethnic violence, they confirmed precisely the motivation for going to war: *'Right now the Serbs are doing what they're good at.'* We regarded those women with cool compassion. It was dreadful, but it would turn out all right.

I'm afraid it was only slowly beginning to dawn on us[9] that the NATO attacks were at least indirectly responsible for the exodus; that the bombing would last not several days, but several months; that the NATO planes flew five kilometres high to stay out of reach of the Serbian air defences; that because of that only fourteen tanks and twenty pieces of artillery were destroyed, compared to 300 factories, 190 schools and 50 clinics; that there were at least 2000 civilian victims and 6000 wounded; that the 'collateral damage' to the civilian population and infrastructure, if it had not yet begun to look like a deliberate tactic, was at least intolerably high; and that NATO's actions went against every form of international law of war.[10]

9.

I look back at the photo, and more particularly at the least important part – those clouds. With Stephan Vanfleteren the skies are never clear blue. Like many black and white photographers he hates bright light. It is only amateurs who get their cameras out on summer days. But there is more to it than that. Like his seventeenth-century predecessor Jan van Goyen, who painted more sky than land, Vanfleteren's clouds already contain everything. They are the canvas against which he portrays his world, and it is not a pretty one. The heavy cloud cover is pure threat, the strip of light above the hills full of foreboding.

His sky is reminiscent of the eclipse of the sun that passed over Europe that same war year. It went dark for three minutes that day, from Cornwall to Syria, as if someone was using a strange torch to project not a beam of light but a beam of shadow across the brightly lit world. In Kosovo the eclipse lasted three months, not three minutes – seventy-nine days of bombing .

Was the war in Kosovo really so different from the Second Gulf War? Was it really the high point of a short, ethical period in international politics? Was it the first but, because of the changed world after 9.11, also the last manifestation of a new type of logic for war, that of military humanism?

Now, six years later, we know better. Diplomatic means were far from being exhausted at the peace negotiations in Rambouillet. NATO's secret, but last-minute demand that the peace agreement should guarantee it free and unlimited access to the whole of Yugoslav territory was absurd and rightly unacceptable to the Serbs. It would have amounted to de facto acceptance of a foreign occupying force in their country.[11] The accusation of genocide levelled against the Serbs was badly documented and later turned out to be unfounded. There was no question of a systematic and planned extermination of a particular population group.[12] If genocide was the motive for going to war, the world had many 'better' and more likely candidates for a NATO intervention. By acting without a specific UN mandate, NATO did serious damage to international law and paved the way for the recent, much more flagrant travesties of multilateral politics. NATO's military hegemony and invulnerability were so disproportionate that, according to international lawyer Richard Falk, the balance of power was like torture, whereby one party inflicts damage on another arbitrarily and at its own discretion, without retribution.[13] NATO's reluctance to deploy ground troops forced the international alliance to cooperate with the local KLA, an organisation which the US had only recently described as terrorist. But the KLA's political language was just as ethnically nationalistic as the Serbs'. In an ethnic conflict it was not very advisable to support the nationalistic claims of one of the warring parties.[14] Today, the bombing raids and their consequences have still not eliminated the ethnic tensions in Yugoslavia but have actually complicated them, with the Serbian Kosovars (the minority within the minority) as the main victims. In March 2004, exactly five years after the start of the war, Kosovo was the scene of the worst ethnic violence in years, despite the presence of UN and NATO troops.[15] And in December 2004, former KLA leader and notoriously brutal political figure Ramush Haradinaj was elected Prime Minister of Kosovo. To be continued, alas.

How do you look at those women once you know that? With anger? Yes, absolutely; but belated anger is also embarrassment.

10.

It is not that I was *moved*, that assumes some measure of resolve, steadfastness, even superiority. Being moved is the melancholic counterpart of a smile, it is being briefly but superficially affected by an incident in the outside world. Being moved is also the empathetic side of pity. The door of sympathy stands ajar, the account number is noted down, the purse opened. But that is not the point. So what is it?

It is not indignation either, which is yet another of those good-hearted senti-

ments, and definitely not melancholy. Anger? Yes, there's anger perhaps, but most of all there's *shame*; shame for the limited depth-of-field with which I used to look at it; shame for the over-exposure of the foreground at the expense of the background, the clouds.

Those out-of-focus eyes again. Shame brings her gaze back to life, makes it disconcertingly alive, even if she is dead. How can I return it? She looks out mildly, yes, full of compassion, without reproach. The look of an owl in a cage, lost but superior, aware but resigned. I look away, but it is no use, even the earrings make me shrink.

No, I am not moved by that photo, but shaken. And it gets worse. ■

Translated by Lindsay Edwards

NOTES

1. *NRC Handelsblad*, 23 March 1999
2. *De Standaard*, 15 April 1999
3. Frank Schlömer, *De Morgen*, 25 March 1999
4. Axel Buyse, *De Standaard*, 25 March 1999
5. *De Morgen*, 25 March 1999
6. See: Tzvetan Todorov, *Hope And Memory: Lessons From The Twentieth Century* (Tr. David Bellos). Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004, chapter 6, for a brilliant analysis.
7. Noam Chomsky,*The New Military Humanism: Lessons from Kosovo*. London: Pluto, 1999.
8. Quoted in Todorov, op.cit., 369
9. Edward Said, 'The Treason Of The Intellectuals'. In: *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 24-30 June 1999. (weekly.ahram.org.eg)
10. 'Some Ethical Aspects of Nato's Intervention in Kosovo'. The Transnational Foundation for Peace and Future Research, 14 July 1999, www.transnational.org/pressinf/pf73.html
11. Noam Chomsky, 'Another Way For Kosovo?'. In: *Le Monde diplomatique*, 14 March 2000 (www.commondreams.org)
12. Noam Chomsky interviewed by Patrick Cain. In: *The Activist*, June 1999. (www.chomsky.info)
13. Richard Falk, 'Reflections on the War'. In: *The Nation*, 28 June 1999. (www.thenation.com)
14. Todorov, op.cit., 344-56.
15. 'Collapse in Kosovo', International Crisis Group, 22 April 2004 (www.icg.org); 'Serbia and Montenegro (Kosovo/Kosova): The March Violence: KFOR and UNMIK's failure to protect the rights of the minority communities', Amnesty International, 8 July 2004 (web.amnesty.org).