

**Special Lecture**

**The New War Imaginary:  
Why we are losing the memory of warfare**

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Thank you. Thank you very much. Thank you to the Institute for Peace Science for inviting me, to Professor Kawano leading the Peace Science Institute, and to Dr. van der Does as well, and thank you certainly to Hiroshima University for making me feel very welcome as a first visitor to your country.

**The new war imaginary:  
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memory of warfare**

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I want to argue that across many parts of the world despite the apparent rage for memorialization and so called everywhere warfare we are actually losing the memory of war. What I want to argue is that we are losing the

memory of nuclear warfare. This forgetting of course has great consequences for how 21st century threats are perceived and responded to. To understand this, I think we need to see that remembering and forgetting of warfare are not separate but are tightly bound through media. The entanglement of media and memory, shape perceptions of the concept, the character, and the threat of warfare. So we need to look at the interrelations between them, media, war, memory to be able to reveal what endures and what is forgotten and to what effects. So, my main argument here today is that a consciousness of nuclear war has been displaced, has been forgotten. This displacement is made through two key ways. Firstly I will talk a bit more about this in a minute. We have heard Professor Hook talk about different levels or spaces or structures of memory and the famous historian Jay Winter talks about different memory regimes.

Asian regime of memory is different to a Western regime of memory. So, I just want to talk a little bit about the western regime of memory. That is because what you find in western mainstream media especially is a kind of persistence of a western heroic version of war. A heroic version of war. A war being legitimized through the repetition of certain images that sanitize, will glorify warfare and of course nuclear warfare is not a heroic version form of warfare.

Secondly the other part of this argument is the rise of the widespread perceived threat of terrorism in information warfare has distracted attention from nuclear threats. This is in a kind of saturating environment of digital and social media in which it pays at least a chaotic abundance of images of warfare in the frontline. So before I set out this model of forgetting war, it is important to say something about the relationship between technology, war, and perception. Critical to the memory and legitimacy of warfare is that is experience for those engaged in combat and for those observing has long been shaped through distancing technologies. A very kind of famous philosopher called Paul Virilio, he talks about this logistics of military perception.

### Paul Virilio

'the history of battle is primarily the history of radically changing fields of perception. In other words, war consists not so much in scoring territorial, economic or other material victories as in appropriating the 'immateriality' of perceptual fields' (1989:7).

Here the history of battle is primarily the history of radically changing fields of perception. In other words war consistent not so much in scoring territorial, economic or other material victories as a procreating vehicle of the immateriality of perceptual fields. So, the point he is trying to make that really is war is a battle of how things are seen and perceived and as we have already heard today, remembered. His memory is vital in how war is legitimized as in Professor Hooks' presentation contested. And to return to what I see as a great kind of paradox in how images of war work today. What I mean by that is in terms of media and memory. There is a great scholar Ariella Azoulay and she argues that there are kind of two contradictory assertions.

### Saturating or ignoring?

- Azoulay (2008: 191):
- ‘two contradictory assertions – one claiming that there are no images, while the other claiming that there are too many – are generally voiced in succession by the same speakers’.
- ‘According to the first claim, there are too few images, thus there is nothing to look at. According to the second claim, there are too many, and therefore it has become impossible to look’.

So, on the one hand there are no images while the other claim is that there are too many. Going to the first claim then there are too few images as nothing to look at. According to the second claim there are too many and it becomes impossible for us to look up war, to get a sense of what war is because we are overloaded by the saturating endless images of war. It might be in both of these cases too many too few images lead in to my argument about displacing nuclear war from western and above the global consciousness. I just want to make this example, just for a few minutes if you will allow me, just to draw on some images of dominant warfare that went through western culture and through a continuing American visualization of war through American mainstream media. The paradox for me is that despite there being billions and billions of images of war today through digital media, the mainstream media in the west is stuck on this idea of a heroic vision of war.

And Michael Shaw looked at three separate western mainstream news organizations. And these three different news organizations sent their best photo journalists to Afghanistan. These three photo journalists from these separate news organizations all came back with the same image, published in photo stories within a two-week period in January 2011. Now these pictures all depict wounded US marines in the rear of a military helicopter coded MEDEVAC being air lifted out of the Afghan war zone to safety.

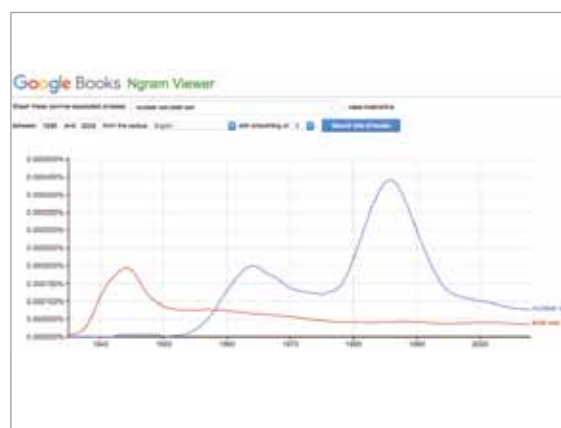
Subsequently, Shaw found a number of similar photographs published in 2010, 2011 and 2012 across a range of mainstream media. In drawing attention to what he calls ‘redundancy,’ Shaw makes clear that his intention is not to disrespect the photographers, the soldiers, or the medevac missions and their saving of lives. Instead, he argues, ‘this is a stunning display of American chauvinism given the intimate framing of the war in such a redundantly heroic narrative, all eyes on our warriors as saviors on high. And then, what does it mean that such high-profile redundancy can occur with hardly a notice?’ (Shaw, 2011).

That’s a really important point. The ways in which mainstream media use the same images, the same frames of war, we become unaware of because we

have become accustomed to a very particular way that war was framed. The artist Simon Norfolk talks about this. This kind of photo journalism. He talks about is running down tramlines. So despite the millions and millions of images you could take in Afghanistan over the past – the decade-long contemporary war has been going on. There seems to be persisting expectation on you said it is in the west at least and photo journalists, and news workers of what a mainstream vision of warfare looks like. But the history here is not just recent, OK? These follow a longer mainstream photo journalism trajectory in the west of this image, which is embedded in early US wars. Simon Norfolk argues that this goes back to 1991. David C. Turnley's this one won World Press Photo of the Year. But this in turn is a kind of reissued to reframing of an even earlier image, namely, Larry Burrows' Vietnam photographics made the cover of Life magazine in April 1965. It is a very famous photograph.

So, the point I want to make here then is, there is a kind of strange divergence between, on the one hand, there is a kind of spontaneous, unfinished, and unsettled and mobile media. We think about social media and digital medias as chaotic and confusing and overloading with lots of millions and thousands of

different perspectives of war. In that, surely, how we understand media today, but here the mainstream media seemed to perpetuate a single dominant frame of war. It's very contrived. But as I said in the beginning both of these cases I am arguing kind of displace nuclear war from a kind of western consciousness. What I want to argue is that in the western memory regime if you want to call it that, the western memory regime has forgotten nuclear war three times. To show this I want to show you a simple Google Books Ngram Viewer. A Google Books Ngram Viewer is an online search engine of books and researches. And why it's useful is because it plots all the thousands and millions of words across all the books that have been digitalized on Google, okay. So, in terms if you look at the English language one over the kind of relevant period, if you search for the terms nuclear war and total war you get this.



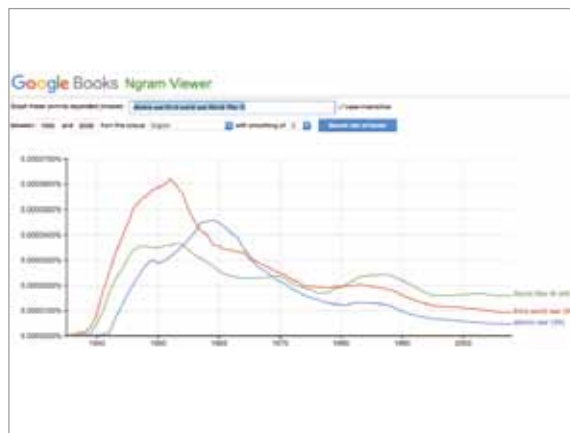
Now obviously total war and nuclear war have similar meanings, but as we

can see from this chart total war was more in use around the bombings of Japan. The term 'nuclear war' became more common in later years. What I am saying this image shows you is three times forgotten. So firstly of course what I am saying is the forgetting of total war after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, this idea of total war recedes very quickly. The second one, that of course is after the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. The term 'nuclear war' disappears. This was after the Moscow-Washington hotline was set up to allow direct communication between the leaders of the United States and the Russian federation. Thirdly, the really big decline on that chart after 1985.

Of course, it was the end of the so-called Second Cold War with rising tensions and rising investment in militaries by US and the Soviet Union during that period. So, this steep decline in the term 'nuclear war' and as you can see from the chart it continues to decline in the opening news of this century. So, what does that tell you about consciousness of nuclear war in the west?

We can also see this similar trend in the use of atomic war and the idea of a Third World War because don't forget it's about memory in the future. How we think about remembering the nuclear

attacks on Japan in thinking about how we might prevent a third World War. If you look at the chart you can see a similar pattern.



So, the idea that there would be a Third World War seems to have slipped out of consciousness. We don't believe it will happen anymore. We don't believe it will happen anymore. The usage of these terms in English language books for me indicates that there is a kind of form of dangerous forgetting. Dangerous forgetting that leads to complacency. Namely, the removal of a widespread perception of the threat of nuclear war actually makes that war more likely. There are a number of commentators who make this argument. The first, these quotes often 2015. This is the Lukanov who argued since the Cold War or the mechanisms for taking each other seriously and disposing means to

control damage. All those mechanisms were disrupted or eroded.

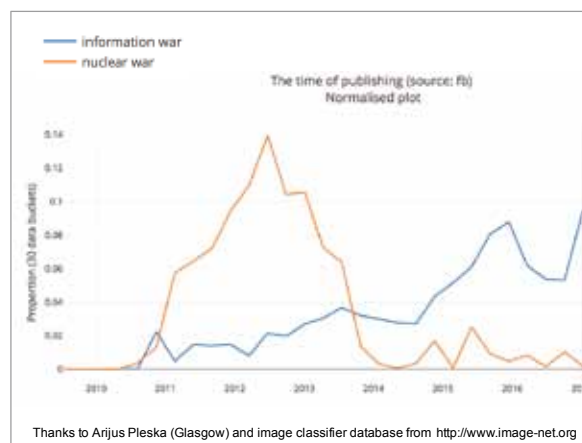
Max Fischer, ‘That the world does not see the risk of war hanging over it,’ in other words, makes that risk all the likelier. For most Americans such predictions sounded probable, even silly, but the dangers are growing every week as are the warnings. Bruce G. Blair argues: there’s a low nuclear threshold now that didn’t exist during the Cold War. When the principle challenges were identified in the memory of warfare and for looking what I am trying to find here is a consciousness of a nuclear threat. It’s the idea that I mentioned earlier of abundance, of overload, a kind of chaos of images in social media. It becomes difficult to identify patterns of what images people are posting and sharing. My question is how can we begin to make sense of what remains and what is lost in the memory of warfare online.

### Dangerous forgetting

- Fyodor Lukyanov: ‘since the Cold War, all the mechanisms for taking each other seriously and disposing means to control damage, all those mechanisms were disrupted or eroded’.
- Max Fisher: ‘That the world does not see the risk of war hanging over it, in other words, makes that risk all the likelier. For most Americans, such predictions sound improbable, even silly. But the dangers are growing every week, as are the warnings’.
- Bruce G. Blair: ‘There’s a low nuclear threshold now that didn’t exist during the Cold War’.

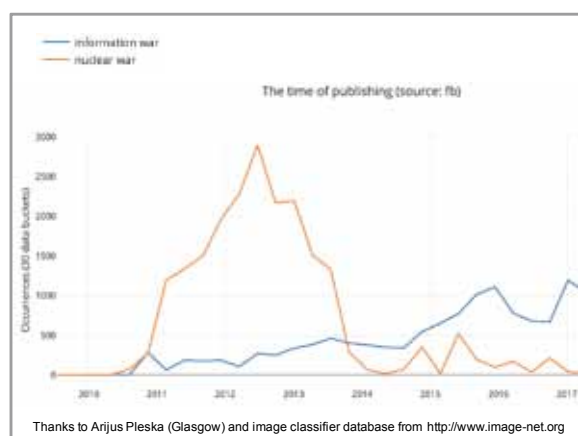
I don’t know how to answer this question with merely human modes

for analysis. It’s so difficult to make sense of source and sample and analyze millions of social media images. So, I have been collaborating with a colleague, Arijus Pleska, who is in Computing Science at Glasgow. We have been developing a system of machine learning software to look at the relationship between images and different wars. For this conference we just load the images related to information in nuclear war. Information war is much more difficult to classify than nuclear war in terms of images. But, here’s a chart of some relevant images posted on Facebook in recent years. So, this chart relates to a kind of sample of several thousand images posted on Facebook over that period.



What we can see is a bump of the images related to nuclear war after 2012. Why was that I ask myself. Well,

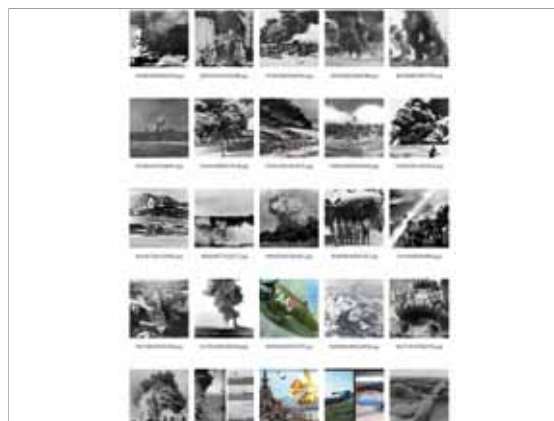
it is probably because President Putin was testing a number of nuclear missiles in October 2012.



What this shows for me is that there is a kind of viral archive of war. Social media tracks events through sourcing an instant supply of images being posted and shared and committed upon. This is part of what I refer to later as the third memory boom where the archive becomes part of the event itself rather being something that is retrospectively curated. Amidst the apparent chaos of images on social media we can identify trends. In my work I am interested in how social media might challenge official archives of war as they feed on the present. These images are some of the ones that we pulled out when we looked for issues around nuclear war and World War III.

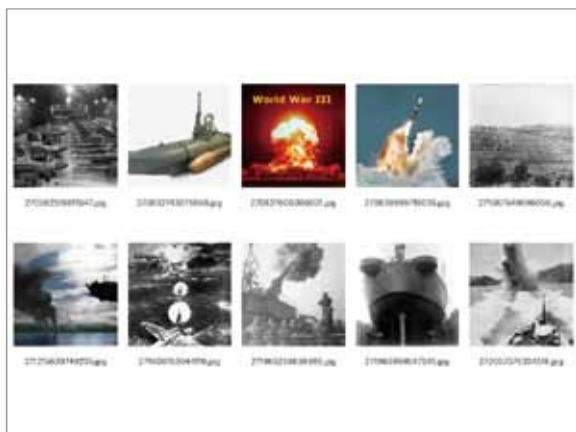
This small sample of a few thousand images associated with war and nuclear war that we just pulled out randomly

from Facebook have some things in common.

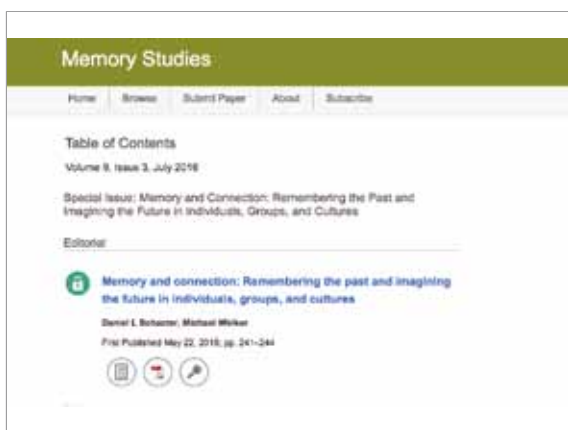


Firstly, they are perhaps and surprisingly mostly of twentieth century war, mostly being black and white but this again reinforces the idea of a threat of a Third World War which they are attached to or total war, not something of potentially in the future but somehow an idea from the past. An idea that was lost with nuclear bombings. Secondly, and this is the contrast we get from the wonderful museum here is that war stands out with them is that there are predominantly images of weapons of war including mushroom clouds. Not of people, not of people dead, not of people injured, not of people burnt, not of the consequences of war. So, this again seems to me a kind of dominant imaginary of warfare that sanitizes. In recent years to help us think about how this might affect the future. Some cycle

had developed models about how memory affects the future.



A special issue of the Journal of Memory Studies last year on memory and connection Conway and Loveday who are kind of neuropsychologists argue that our individual memories shape what we consider to be plausible, what we think might happen in the future and they write of it remembering imagining system.



And at a social level in the same issue people argue that manipulating collective memory can shape the imaginings of the future and that's why Professor Hooks'

paper was so important. He was demonstrating exactly how that was happening. Equally as the artist Shona Illingworth has argued: 'Memory is very important to our capacity to imagine the future. If you suffer from amnesia it makes it very difficult for you to not only inhabit your past but it becomes equally difficult to imagine the future in any detail'.

Shona Illingworth (2014):  
 'Memory is very important to our capacity to imagine the future ... If you suffer from amnesia, it makes it very difficult for you to not only inhabit your past, [ ... ] but it becomes equally difficult to imagine the future in any detail'.

The principle challenge then is for the development of a memory of nuclear bombings of past wars that enables a nuclear war to be imagined in usable terms, a useable past. Apparently given the mix of amnesia and what I am suggesting is the kind of wrong type of remembering in western media of total war as distant as history as sanitized. In the West at least, we don't have a very usable memory of war.

This work is part of broader model I am developing of forgetting war. I just want to take the last 5 minutes just to go through this model. As I mentioned



earlier today in the West we are going through and another part of the world a third memory boom and Jay Winter the great historian identifies two memory booms. The first generational memory boom is drawn from the 1890s to the 1920s when memory was central to the formation of national identities around memorializing the victims of the First World War and then the remembrance of the Second World War fed into the second memory boom from the 1960s and the 70s. But of course, as we know in many parts of the world what followed the end of World War Two was a kind of silence, a limited and mostly private recollection, denial, unspoken trauma, a non-memory. But once the kind of memory boom had begun, these events were to become grit in some ways by unstoppable cycles of commemoration and memorialization.

### Forgetting War

- Third memory boom: rage for memorialisation
- Implosion of memory and history
- Western mainstream redundant vision of 'heroic' warfare
- Social media unsettling of recent wars in memory
- Overexposure and underexposure: too many and too few images
- What constitutes the archive of war?
- Total/nuclear war forgotten three times
- Displaced by rise of threat of terrorism and information warfare
- Mistaken reading of everywhere media as 'everywhere war'

In the West at least but also in other parts of the world, the second memory boom was driven by developments in

technology, the audiovisual recorder enabled a new documentation of survivor's testimonies. This was my point to the beginning how technology and memory and remembering are interlinked. The second memory boom accelerated at the end of the 20th century in the 1990s with the rise of satellite television. It enabled 50th and 60th anniversary memorial events to be televised live and across those countries involved in or affected by World War Two. But today we have what I call a third memory boom. This is the virility, the contagion of digital media which drives a haste, a rage for memorialization.

The politics of memory and emerging wars and other catastrophes are fought over even before these events have ended. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan for example are deeply contested and popular wars and these wars enter much more quickly into memorial spaces online, into museums by victims' families, by the military and by artist, all part when you are kind of critical of media ecology of memory. There's no time to pause or reflect for their memory to settle.

But at the same time there is an imbalance of remembering and forgetting. Some wars and some catastrophes attract what is being called the memory industry while

others fade away. Remembering is not always a good thing. Forgetting is not always bad. Memory in history seems to be blurred together. Digital technologies have shifted our registers of time, decay, familiarity, and permanence. The limits of memory in history have been redefined. As I have said social media constitute a viral archive of war. Traditional media have showed memory by placing visual templates of past, events unfolding in the present to help render those events intelligible. Social media as I have shown doesn't just offer 1 or 2 images to make sense in the present but thousands and millions, even though some become heavily shared and some just don't. This raises the question of what counts as an archive of war today? Just because there are millions of images online we mustn't be confused to think that these are also accessible. How and by whom can these images be accessed in the future? To what use can these images be put? What kind of memories can be forged from social media or is it the ultimate medium of forgetting.

As I mentioned earlier, there is this contradiction between too many and too few images. For me in many ways social media unsettle war memory. I have also talked about how our current Western mainstream perpetuates an idea of

heroic warfare. You seem stuck on seeing current war through a particular heroic frame struggling to legitimize its 21st century conflicts. I have also argued that nuclear war has been totally forgotten three times. I have said that this is a dangerous form of forgetting. A kind of failure if you like. A failure of memorialization to imagine the prospects of a future World War. At the same time disproportionate perceptions of terrorist threats obscure the very meaning of warfare as it was traditionally conceived and remembered. Finally, the perception of a kind of continuous threat from terrorism and information war. Some kind of any time every war is a case of forgetting yourself. Certainly in the West, we have forgotten what the 1950s were like. A decade when there were multiple wars and threats and uncertainties. Looking back, we don't see the world in the same way. We don't see the multiple wars and conflicts going on in the 1950s. We tend to see history chronologically and we forget.

To conclude, for me today what gives current warfare its complexity is a bottom-up feel that every militant or group on the ground inside Syria have their own Twitter or YouTube feed posting random material or feeding a continuous chaos of digital war when everyone is a publisher, a commentator,

a journalist and the past is turned over in new ways in these circumstances of media flux. The veracity of events becomes more rather than less easy to discern or verify. A kind of post truth or post trust media war. This is kind of digitally mediated perception of war that distracts and the greater threats, the bigger picture of the potential of nuclear war. Instead what is needed as I have argued is the establishment of a usable memory of war, both locally and regionally and globally. We will only be able to use the past through evading the distortions and forgetting of time and media, unless we need to ask how we can keep a stable history in view, and I think the Institute for Peace Science is best placed to ensure that this happens. I really do support and praise its vital work. Thank you.

