

Art Blundell – April 10, 2014
Thoughts on Tim

You can draw a line through any two points, but to draw a straight line through three, they need to be in perfect alignment. That's a rare event. But in Tim, I see such alignment.

The first is the motivation for his work. Tim told me that his movies were to be a triptych answering: how is it that old men can get young men to use violence so that the old men can get what they want. After millennia of cultural evolution, how is it that society still sanctions such violence?

He saw the first film—*Liberia Uncivil War*—depicting 'The Other' fighting 'The Other': Charles Taylor and Sekou Conneh using children as fighters in a bid to gain or maintain control of Liberia and its natural wealth. The next film—*Restrepo*—was 'Us' versus 'Them', young U.S. soldiers versus Afghan insurgents with dyed beards and kohl-lined eyes... The last movie was supposed to complete the straight line by showing 'Us' versus 'Us'. Tim talked about making a film of drug lords using their lieutenants like pawns – just as the generals used the soldiers over a hilltop of ambiguous importance.

But his lines didn't always run parallel. Orthogonal to the violence in *Restrepo* was Tim's mediation on war & masculinity: *Sleeping Soldiers*. He was interested in how we—himself included—process trauma.

Such a narrative arc is why Tim didn't think of himself as a war photographer. He was an artist looking for a new language, a new media through which to communicate.

And here, his lineage of inspiration is clear – the shoulders on shoulders on which he stood: Christopher Marlowe through James Joyce—the archetypal 'innovators'. Like Tim, they sought to change the way we communicate: Joyce through *Ulysses* changes the English novel, and Marlowe sets the table for Shakespeare, breaking from cloying couplets to the freedom of blank verse. Watch Tim's *Diary* again and see the stream of consciousness that flows from Marlowe through Joyce.

In fact it flows back through *Ulysses* to the original *Odyssey*. Stephen Daedalus is Homer's Telemachus –the same name as Tim's middle name. Tim Alastair *Telemachus* Hetherington.

Bitterly ironic, Telemachus is Greek for "far from War", as he was Odysseus' son who, still an infant, did not go to the Trojan War.

Equally ironic is the story of Saint Telemachus: a monk in the fifth century who, disgusted with the blood sport, tried to stop a gladiatorial fight in a Roman amphitheatre, only to be stoned to death by the crowd. The Christian Emperor Honorius, impressed by his martyrdom, brought a permanent end to the gladiatorial 'games'.

The last night I saw Tim, he said he was tired of the stereotyped war photographer depicted as an adrenaline junkie unable to keep a relationship. I asked, "What is the right story?" and he said – referring to the influence of Kit Marlowe once again—"Dr Faust". Tim explained, 'It is the deal the photographer makes with the devil to gain that 'complete understanding of the inexplicable: war', as well as the immortality—or at least the feeling of it—needed to

head to the front line. In exchange, instead of the portrait-photographer stealing your soul, it is with each image made of the atrocities committed in war, the devil takes another piece of the war photographer's soul.'

Except, tragically, *Faust* is only a metaphor. But the metaphor extends to us all, not just war photographers—every time we compromise on our principles, we make that Faustian bargain.

And that's the line back and forth that Tim was traveling. Having studied *Ulysses* for his Oxford degree, the stories of Telemachus surely weren't lost on him. Last year, at the screening of Tim's biography at the wonderful Bronx Documentary Center, the New York Times media critic David Carr said when he met Tim, he seemed like Superman. I know what he means, but I suspect that Tim was much more interested in reaching Homer's Everyman because that is how he viewed himself trying to make sense of his world.

The influence of Tim's work is undoubtedly too early to judge. But there's no doubt time's arrow fell too soon. At least its flight was true.