

A Picture-Story

Issues in Photojournalism: *truth, representation, propaganda, aesthetics*



W Eugene Smith, *Country Doctor*, Life magazine, 20 September 1948

Introduction: historical origins

Photography's invention in 1839 was part of a historic transformation in Western Europe and the USA, when the spread of industrialization drew thousands from rural environs into expanding urban areas. A new kind of life on the streets was born, characterized by noise and crowds, the continual proximity of people who were dissociated from one another. With the invention of the single-lens-reflex (SLR) camera in the 1860s, photographers went out to record 'picturesque' views of the poor children, street vendors, ethnic types and beggars who made their lives on the streets. Some photographers from privileged backgrounds, such as Frenchman, Jacques-Henri Lartigue took candid pictures of members of their own class disporting themselves in public. Photographs were also made with the intention of aiding entire groups of people who were widely regarded as outsiders.



Jacob A. Riis, *Home of an Italian Ragpicker*, circa 1890

Danish newspaper reporter Jacob A. Riis began taking photographs of impoverished or homeless people in the late 19th century to back up his own reporting on the squalid conditions in notorious Manhattan slum and thereby invented the notion of *social reform photography*. In the early 1930s photographers capitalized on the mobility afforded by the development of small, high-quality cameras. Now, people's most fleeting gestures and momentary expressions could be captured and the most important exponent was humanist photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson and his Magnum friends who shaped odd and playful moments on the street. But Cartier-Bresson's famous dictum of *the decisive moment* was at the same time reviled by the American, Walker Evans whose claim to fame was a series of objective, unsentimental and critical images of the 1930s Depression among farmers in America's Deep South.



Robert Frank, from the book *The Americans*, 1958

Evans pioneered *Straight Photography* and stands firmly in the photographic history as one of the most influential documentary photographers until a Swiss émigré Robert Frank washed a shore in New York and went across the United States on a scholarship capturing in bleak, poetic b/w photographs the mood of God's own country. These iconoclastic pictures published in his groundbreaking book *The Americans* changed photography immeasurably, introducing a more personal and subjective interpretation of how to tell a story through pictures in comparison to photojournalism's claim of objectively photographing 'things as they are' (Cartier-Bresson used this quote in his book, *The Decisive Moment* [1952] to define the subject of photojournalism.)

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'Photojournalism' is a term most people understand but it has far defied definition. Some refer it to 'pictures on a page' or 'words and pictures' but most accept photojournalism as serving a descriptive purpose – storytelling – photography with the function of recording and reporting things as they are. The old saying that, 'a picture tells a thousand words' associate photography, and in particular, photojournalism with a certain delivery of facts and claims of truth that most people take for granted. 'The camera was there and recorded what I saw' is often the response by the photojournalists but is photography a universal language where we can rely on its ability to freeze a moment in time accurately and objectively as historical evidence or as witness to the world? These beliefs were strongly held among members of the modernist movement and the powerful aesthetic that we now call 'documentary' influenced many artists, writers and filmmakers of the 1930s. Even back then influential critic Walter Benjamin pointed out the fallibility of the photographic image and its relation to reality and truth, 'transforming even abject poverty...into an object of enjoyment.' (*The Author as Producer*, 1934) But it was not until the 80s that photography caught up with theory associated with post-modernism and finally accepted that all forms of representation, whether in art, literature or film is subjective – a personal view and interpretation of things seen, felt or experienced by its maker whose beliefs, values and attitudes are shaped by his/her own cultural, social and political upbringing. Many photographs have proven to be untrue and with digital technology it is much easier technically to manipulate and construct pictures which does not represent reality e.g. at the time of the Abu Ghraib torture photos, fabricated images of brutality to Iraqis by British soldiers appeared in the Daily Mirror.



Hocine, Massacre in Algiers, World Press Photo 1997

Headline, caption and text can powerfully affect the way we read and understand an image. The context of the image and the photographer's intention to take it can inform us and give a particular meaning to a photograph, which in turn will affect our relationship with the image. Former editor of the *Sunday Times*, Harold Evans said that, 'without such information, the image is a hostage to our prejudices and preconceptions.' This relationship between the image and text can both illuminate but also falsify and assist in bringing across a certain point of view. The living hell in the trenches in the First World War was obscured from the public; in the London blitz, the photography showed the plucky Cockneys, not the charred bodies. Photographs can lie and be used for propaganda and you must always be critical about what they represent and scrutinize its sources and claims.



Abu Ghraib torture and hoax story in the Daily Mirror, 2003

Since its inception photography has always been preoccupied with depicting the exotic, bizarre and strange as seen in *National Geographic* showing images of distant places and civilizations. For the photojournalist certain subjects are appealing for the opportunity of producing pictures which will have an emotional impact on the viewer. Before photography illustrated books provided popular subjects like crime and impoverishment and many photographic studies of the streets of New York, Paris, London and Calcutta continue this well-established tradition of exposing taboo, hidden or overlooked aspects of society across class, race and gender focussing on the destitute and disadvantaged e.g. prostitutes, drug-users, fate of children and ethnic minorities. As the illustrated press sought to improve sales the editors quickly discovered that some stories sold better than others. Popular subject-matter to appear in newspapers and magazines are natural disasters; hurricanes, volcanoes floods, and earthquakes make compelling subjects for pictures along with shipwrecks train crashes and fires. Pictures of death are a best-seller and nothing can compare to war which sells the most, and which attracts the largest numbers of journalists, TV-reporters and photographers. During the war in Vietnam more than 400 journalists were stationed there. At the invasion of Iraq in 2003 it is believed that more than 3000 reporters a day were covering the conflict from media outlets across the globe.

The disbelief in the power of the photographic image to represent truth came about as a direct result of the Vietnam War which ended in 1975 after a series of stories and half a dozen of photographs emerged from the disaster that changed public opinion against the American intervention in South-East Asia. In war, historically the media would represent its country in a patriotic way and promote national interests but here was an example of the emerging link between photojournalism and politics and the photographer with a moral, social and political conscience. Photography not only shifted people's attitude towards the Americans dominant ideology on the perils of communism but also, to some extent, changed the course of history and argued for social change. The introduction of colour in this era of photojournalism by the like of Larry Burrows and Don McCullin also contributed to a new way of looking at the world – although many photojournalists equated colour with commercial work and the work of the snapshot-happy amateurs taking photographs on holidays and at family parties. Even today many photographers prefer working in b/w because of its timeless and aesthetic appeal and reject colour photography as vulgar and too real.



Huynh Cong (Nick) Ut, *Trangbang, Vietnam*, World Press Photo of the Year 1972

Some photographers and some stories

Although legendary photojournalist, W Eugene Smith was first discovered after his stark images of battle in the second world war, his reputation was cemented with his issue-based stories of everyday heroes like a, *Country Doctor* or *Nurse Midwife* published in the hugely influential and important post-war publication *Life* magazine which refined the art of the photo-essay. But although W Eugene Smith was a perfectionist and demanded editorial freedom over his work he had to accept that photojournalism is a collaborative project between the photographer who make the pictures, writers who create text, editors and art directors who organise the story on the page (and who in many cases conceive and commission it), journals that print the story and audiences that read it.



Sebastio Salgado, *Serra Pelada gold mine*, 1986

As the printed media had to compete with television in bringing 'breaking news' to people in their living rooms magazines had to specialise as a commodity in order to survive which meant that advertising became the main income for publications rather than readers buying the latest issue. This resulted in fewer pages available for serious and lengthy picture stories in favour of today's immediate breaking news, local crime stories, accidents, life-style supplements, sport contests and celebrity culture which opened up lucrative opportunities for the Paparazzi to exploit the reader's desire for the latest images of celebrity culture. The Paparazzi is seen as an extreme and perverse form of voyeurism where spying on and recording famous peoples' antics not only profit the photographer and publication, but also, is a symptom of our salacious appetite for scandal and sensationalism, which critic and historian, Fred Ritchin calls, 'the desire to be entertained, not the desire to know'. The era of 'kiss and tell' stories has killed the space on the printed page for the politically concerned photographer who instead is promoting his work independently free from the constraint of editors and newspaper politics to reach a broader audience who empathise with the endeavours of dignified photojournalism.

One such photographer whose work is both published in the popular press, in books and shown in large exhibitions worldwide is Sebastio Salgado. Although his epic, concerned and enduring photographic studies on the famine in sub-Saharan Africa, the landless peasant in his country of Brazil and the monumental body of *Workers: An Archaeology of the Industrial Age* photographed over many years have won him praise from all over the world and landed him many of photojournalism's top awards he has also been criticized for anesthetizing the poor and deprived through his unique visual style, mastery of photography's technical skill and highly detailed and artful photographic prints which renders his subject-matter almost too beautiful.



Dmitri Baltermans, *Kerch, Crimea*, 1942

The relationship in the photograph between content (what is photographed) and form (how it is composed) puts in focus one of the perplexities of the medium. What is the relevance of composition when in a trench at Belsen you come across the emaciated cadavers of the Nazi death camp? Photojournalist, Margaret Bourke-White told how she caught herself framing the picture for aesthetic effect and reflected that trying to make a composition of visual appeal would be an obscenity. In the famous image of Russians searching among the dead for relatives and friends murdered by the German in Crimea in 1942 the photographer had 'helped' to make the picture memorable by darkening the clouds to intensify the sombre nature of the scene. Some would argue this is an important part of the still-image to create a certain atmosphere, drama and style.

A shift from the picture-essay which stretched over many pages in a magazine to the single-picture story that convey a narrative in one photo has occurred in the last two decades. One such photographer who was instrumental in creating what the picture editors often refer to as the 'big picture' was Gilles Peress and his dispatches from Iran published in his groundbreaking book, *Telex Iran* with its impressionistic sequences of photographs and non-conformist text (telexes exchanged with his agency regarding deals with magazine clients rather than captions concerning Iran) using a super wide angle and getting close up to his subject to create an image that contains the whole story of a conflict with distorted perspectives between foreground and background. Peress was part of a group within the stoic co-operative of photographers, Magnum that reacted against its narrative formulae, offering a 'new photojournalism' that was reflective showing some of the workings of how news was created and told within the media.



Gilles Peress, from the book *Telex Iran*, 1979-80

Art or journalism: the rise of the reporter-artist

This chimed nicely with the new breed of postmodernists who sought to break down old and traditional barriers across the arts and today photography has disseminated even further beyond the magazine page and newspaper stands and become part of the fabric of 'modern' art. Martin Parr is another member of the (in)famous photo agency, Magnum who has distinguished himself from the others both in style and subject matter by showing his work in contemporary art galleries and museums alongside paintings and other masterpieces by famous artists in the history of art. The lines between art and journalism or personal expression and reportage have been blurred. The distinctive compositions and prints made by photojournalists such as James Nachtwey and Stanley Green have earned them exhibitions, books and a new following in the art world based on images originally produced while covering a story for publication. When is a photograph a work of art or an illustration?



Martin Parr, from his book, *The Last Resort*, 1982-85

A photographer who is trained in photojournalism Frenchman, Luc Delahaye is asking this question with his *History* series that won him the prestigious Citibank Photography Prize worth £20,000 in 2004 which celebrates the most talked about work within contemporary fine-art photography. Delahaye's large-scale panoramic photographs showing a long distance overview of current events from hotspots around the world like the war in Afghanistan, suicide bombing in Baghdad and the indictment of Slobodan Milosevic at the Human Rights Tribunal in The Hague. His work are without the pathos and sentiment associated with photojournalism and the big, spectacular and detailed pictures have been compared with traditions of history painting like the art of the great French painters, Delacroix, David and Gericault. Another phenomenon that has developed over the years within war reportage is the concept of 'aftermath documentary', which in many ways is seen



Luc Delahaye, *Baghdad #4*, from his series *History*, 2003 1942

as more objective as the photographer is removed from the action and is merely documenting a landscape, a place or a people after an event. Prominent among this approach to documentary photography are British photographers Simon Norfolk and Paul Seawright whose descriptive large-format

photographs is a continuation of the work by Americans, Richard Misrach, Joel Sternfeld and Robert Adams who in the late 70s established a new approach to landscape photography coined *New Topography* by including man's intervention into nature rather than framing nature for nature's sake in an abstract, beautified and idyllic form as practiced by landscape photographers Ansel Adams and Edward Weston.

With the emergence in 1996 of Richard Billingham's apparent unintentional bleak portrayals of his drunken and rowdy parents in their council flat social realism and voyeurism were again acceptable and on the 'fine-art' agenda. Since then other so-called documentary photographers have enjoyed fame and fortune through the generous art collector Charles Saatchi, such as Russian chronicler, Boris Mikhailov's work

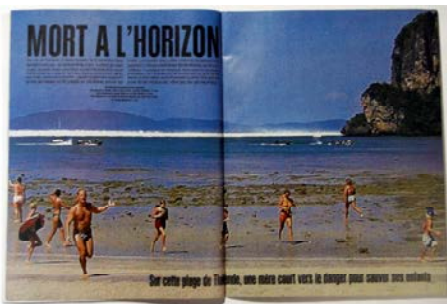


Richard Billingham, from his book *Ray's a Laugh*, 1996

Case History (2001) of nude pictures of the homeless of Russia which won him both prizes and much criticism for his apparent lack of ethics in exposing and exploiting the poor and vulnerable in the name of art. The same year Wolfgang Tillmans' won the Turner Prize for his snapshot aesthetic of everyday life and portraiture of gay friends transforming magazine layout and merging fashion photography with high art. This 'point and shoot' style has also been adopted by Briton, Nick Waplington who in the late 90s embarked on several around-the-world trips photographing everything he saw with no consideration for either motif, style or quality of the medium.

The digital age

With the rise of digital technology and the internet globalisation of the consumer market place now spans every continent – kids want the same trainers, see the same TV shows, hear the same music, whether they live in Paris, Beirut, Rio or a small village in West Africa. By the time America invaded Afghanistan in 2001, photographers still travelled by donkey across the desert, but they carried power-packs to transmit images via satellite to their agencies, able to reach any newspaper in the world in seconds. And with the war in Iraq in 2003, digital images travelled back to waiting websites as soon as exposures were made. Still pictures now beat television in the race to broadcast breaking news.



Tsunami, as featured in French magazine, *Paris Match*, 2005

The facility to communicate on the internet and an emerging culture of do-it-yourself media has broken old monopolies over the production and distribution of news. Perhaps most significant is the way in which digital photography and new channels for publication allow anyone with a camera to find an audience for his or her work. This 'democracy of photographs' was heralded as the subtitle of the exhibition, website and

book *Here is New York* (2002), featuring contributions from both professionals and the masses of amateurs whose cameras recorded the events surrounding the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Centre. The borderless media world with its promiscuous appropriation of images has forced photojournalists to re-examine the relationship between authors, publishers and readers. The application of the term 'photo-journalism' to camera-phone pictures of the 2004 tsunami will be questioned by some not to be the work of the serious reporter, but being published in magazines and on the internet, we are forced to conclude that in the digital age anyone can become a photojournalist. Whether or not this is a good or a bad thing, and what exact implications it has for the future of photojournalism, is another matter.