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05 Mar 2008

UNCONCERNED BUT NOT INDIFFERENT ⁽ⁱ⁾

By Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin

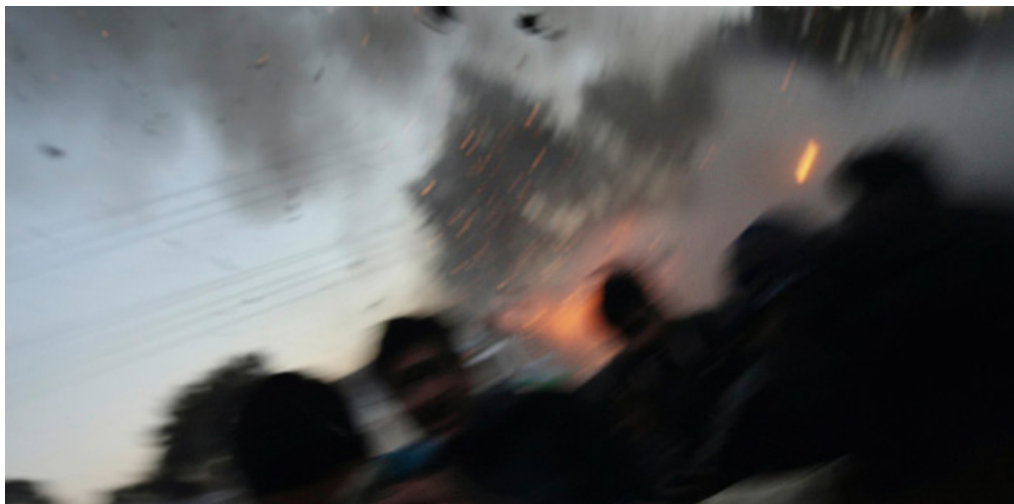
*"The most political decision you make is where you direct people's eyes"**Wim Wenders, The Act of seeing.* ⁽ⁱⁱ⁾

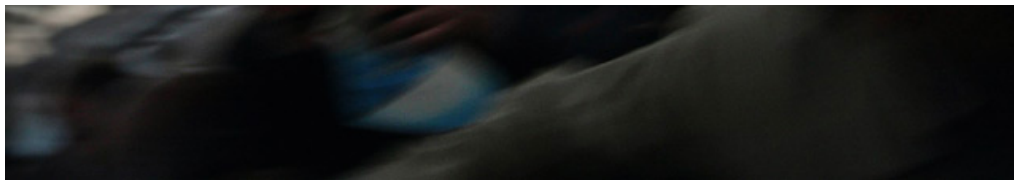
"The tremendous development of photojournalism has contributed practically nothing to the revelation of the truth about conditions in this world. On the contrary photography, in the hands of the bourgeoisie, has become a terrible weapon against the truth. The vast amount of pictured material that is being disgorged daily by the press and that seems to have the character of truth serves in reality only to obscure the facts. The camera is just as capable of lying as the typewriter" - Bertolt Brecht, 1931 ⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾

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1st Prize Spot News, Singles: John Moore, USA, Getty Images. Assassination of Benazir Bhutto

A recent photograph, taken during the assassination of Benazir Bhutto in December 2007, captures the essence of the photojournalistic image as it was originally conceived by early pioneers like Robert Capa. Taken an instant after the bomb detonated, at a distance of just 10 meters from its epicentre, it is not really a photograph at all, but a blur, a piece of smudged evidence that testifies to the fact that our journalist was there, as close as he could possibly be to the lethal action, when the shutter opened and closed.

Photographs hardly ever break the news these days. In Scotland Yard's recent investigation into the series of events that lead to Bhutto's death, videos taken on mobile phones, rather than the work of professional photojournalists (like this one above), were used as evidence. In recent years some of the most striking visual images of major news events, such as 9/11, Abu Ghraib, the Tsunami, and Hurricane Katrina, have been captured by ordinary people who just happen to be there with their mobile phones or video cameras. Where does this leave the photojournalist who has been acting as our brave proxy, sending us reports from the front line of life since the Spanish Civil War?

The World Press Photo has been handing out annual awards to professionals for the past 51 years, and has just announced its winners for 2007 (the photograph above won first prize for 'spot news'). We were asked to participate as jury members in awarding the prizes this year; a good opportunity to gauge the vital signs of a photographic genre in crisis.

The impact of the awards on the industry cannot be underestimated. An exhibition of the winning images are seen by over 2 million people in 50 different countries and 45,000 copies of the book circulates in six languages. Clearly they have a profound affect on the way world events are represented by professional photojournalists.

Flicking through the 81,000 images originally submitted a sense of déjà vu is inevitable. Again and again similar images are repeated, with only the actors and settings changing. Grieving mothers, charred human remains, sun sets, women giving birth, children playing with toy guns, cock fights, bull fights, Havana street scenes, reflections in puddles, reflections in windows, football posts in unlikely locations, swaddled babies, portraits taken through mosquito nets, needles in junkies' arms, derelict toilets, Palestinian boys throwing stones, contorted Chinese gymnasts, Karl Lagerfeld, models preparing for fashion shows backstage, painted faces, bodies covered in mud, monks smoking cigarettes, pigeons silhouetted against the sky, Indian Sardus, children leaping into rivers, pigs being slaughtered.

The twelve strong Jury must endure a barrage of photographic clichés over a period of seven days and nights, in order to locate one single image, the World Press Photo of the year. There are also prizes for photographs in a variety of categories, but it is this single image that gets the real attention. How do twelve people reach a consensus? And what criteria could possibly be used to nominate just one image?

First we were assembled into a windowless room in Amsterdam, squeezed between a digital projector and a coffee machine, and sworn to secrecy. We are six photographers specializing in war, nature, sports, editorial and art photography, plus five photo editors and a curator.

The World Press Photo awards have been running for over 5 decades and in that time a clear procedure has evolved. It is a highly disciplined, mathematical system designed by psychologists to elicit consensus from a group of diverse, opinionated individuals. The total number of images had already been reduced to 17,000 the previous week by the first round jury. Most of the pornography and pictures of domestic cats had been removed. Our job was to reduce that number to one. Each of us clasped a voting button in the half darkness, and as the images flashed across the screen we voted anonymously to keep it in the competition or "to kill it". As we progressed the long serving secretary and master of ceremonies, Stephen Mayes, announced in dry tones the results of each round of votes, a stream of IN's and OUT's, occasionally elaborating, "birds of paradise IN, snakes OUT, suicide bomb IN, dead children OUT, women with acid burns IN, Chairman Mao impersonator OUT, Guantanamo Bay detainee IN, sumo wrestles OUT..." The mechanism used for voting, nine buttons connected to a central computer display was originally developed for a Dutch TV game show.

At this stage caption information is not available; each image must be judged on aesthetic grounds, outside of the context for which it was created, severed from words of explanation. This is simply practical; the sheer volume of images precludes more intense scrutiny. But without names, dates, locations, or interviews with the photographers the decision making process regresses into using only formal considerations; composition, lighting and focus. At times this feels obscene. We are asked to judge whether for example a photograph of a child suffocating to death in a mudslide is sufficiently beautiful to win a prize. On this occasion it seems not.

in the tradition of the World Press Photo awards, a photograph that relies on its caption to create meaning is impotent. This is a strange prejudice, considering every one of the images in the competition would have been accompanied by text in its original context. Susan Sontag warns against the decontextualisation of images in her book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, when she describes how during fighting between Serbs and Croats at the beginning of the Balkan wars, the same photographs of children being killed in the shelling of a village were passed around at both Serb and Croat propaganda briefings.^(iv)

One submission that was eliminated because of this prejudice, showed a full frame of spectators holding up their mobile phones in order to photograph something out of frame, something going on behind the photographer. It could have been taken at any sporting event or music concert. It turned out to be a public execution in Iran. This photograph is not simply reporting an event but alerts us to something more disturbing, our desire to look at the spectacle of a man being executed, and the role of photography as a facilitator. It is precisely the image's ambiguity, its reliance on its caption that makes it so much more interesting than the image of the prisoner himself, hanging from a rope, which the photographer also captured, and which made it into a later round before being eliminated.



2nd Prize General News, Singles: Stanley Greene, USA, Noor. Attack plan, Chad-Sudan border

Another image that did eventually win a prize in the general news category and was contentious for the same reason, depicts a drawing of a battle plan from Darfur, sketched into the sand on the floor of a hut. Without a caption it is a meaningless squiggle. But together with the explanation the image is suddenly transformed into something truly menacing; a real insight into the low-tech horror of the genocide.

Judging the World Press Awards feels a bit like ingesting a highly concentrated version of the years' news in a single sitting. The effect is numbing. When you see hundreds of pictures, many of them describing human pain, and all seamlessly stuck together in a power point presentation, each individual image becomes less demanding. One person's suffering is instantly cancelled out by the next.

The submissions attest to our insatiable hunger for images of suffering. "Sight can be turned off; we have lids on our eyes", says Sontag.^(v) But sometimes we just can't resist taking a look. Since its inception photojournalism has traded in images of human suffering. If one of its motivations for representing tragedy has been to change the world then it has been unsuccessful. Instead the profession has turned us into voyeurs, passively consuming these images, sharing in the moment without feeling implicated or responsible for what we are seeing. Roland Barthes summed up the analgesic effect of looking at images of horror when he wrote "someone has shuddered for us; reflected for us, judged for us; the photographer has left us nothing - except a simple right of intellectual acquiescence"^(vi). Put another way, we look at events in photographs and feel relieved that they're not happening anywhere near us.

For seven days the Jury deliberated; we viewed and discuss photographs together, ate meals together, smoked cigarettes together, often for 20 hours at a time. We worked together to identify the winners and runners-up for each category and to

narrow down the selection for the most important award – the World Press Photo of the year. It is interesting to look back at five photographs that over the course of judging received a great deal of attention and through them examine how we arrived

at our decisions.

The first of these images cannot be shown because it failed to win an award in any category. It is worth describing however, for the sake of this discussion. This tightly cropped photograph of a young Thai prostitute lying on a bed with a client, was shot from above looking down, showing her head, shoulders and naked breast. The client's hand cups her breast, his lips touch her neck while her head turned away from him in a gesture of quiet resistance. The image is carefully lit and composed with consideration normally reserved for fashion photographs, making it appealing and seductive and for this reason extremely unsettling. If we feel beguiled by it then we are somehow implicated in the act. The jury called for answers. Who was the woman in the picture? What was the relationship of the photographer to the girl? Did the photographer have her full consent. Can a vulnerable woman operating in the environment of a brothel even give or deny consent? Did money change hands? Did it matter? Ultimately the photograph was eliminated from the competition. It is important to note, for the record, that the integrity of the photographer was not in question.



1st Prize Contemporary Issues, Stories: Jean Revillard, Switzerland, rezo.ch. Makeshift huts of immigrants, Calais, France

The second photograph was from a series depicting makeshift huts built by African immigrants in northern France. In the European press there has been a deluge of images of immigrants trying to enter Europe—cramped into trucks, overflowing rubber dingies, languishing in asylum centres—images that serve to reinforce the European fear of a barbarian invasion by nameless hordes. The photographs of these huts were different. The photographer had employed a deceptively simple methodology; the hut dwellers themselves were not in the pictures and the huts were placed in the centre of each frame, at the same distance from the camera. These images cut through with a more complex and sophisticated visual language and attest to a level of human ingenuity and a desperate need to survive. For some Jurors however it was “a step too far”. What exactly did they mean?

Within the tradition of the World Press Photo awards, and in the category of News in particular, there is the largely outdated expectation that a photograph should mirror the scene witnessed by the photographer—it must be unmediated. Yet the dubious relationship between photography and reality is by now widely accepted. After all some of the most iconic ‘documentary’ images etched in our minds have been staged, for the camera. For this Jury however the possibility of a ‘constructed’ news image was worrying. By contrast the author of these photographs is not playing the role of reliable witness, dutifully recording events without bias. He announces himself present at the scene, making a simple conceptual framework and a level of artifice visible that interrupts the idea of the photographer as invisible, and the photograph as evidence. This is refreshing.





1st Prize Daily Life, Singles: Justin Maxon, USA, Aurora Photos. Mui, a homeless woman with HIV and her son bathe in the Red River, Vietnam

The third photograph was a black and white image of a mother and child. This is familiar territory for press images and a motif that rarely fails to have the desired impact. In this instance an HIV positive mother is tenderly caressed by her infant daughter. Reminiscent of the Pieta, it is an image that has been replicated many times to illustrate famine and pandemic since the inception of photojournalism. The walls of the World Press offices in Amsterdam are crammed with them. If our job was to award original and innovative photography then it's hard to see how this could be a contender for a prize. Yet opinion in the room was divided.



1st Prize Contemporary Issues, Singles: Brett Sturton, South Africa, Getty Images. Evacuation of dead Mountain Gorillas, Congo

The fourth image shows a dead gorilla tied to a wooden stretcher being carried through the jungle in Eastern Congo by a group of men. It's easy to see why this one was appealing enough to make the final round. Its references to Christian iconography, specifically the crucifixion, is striking. Nature here becomes the martyr, sacrificed for our greed. A convincing plea for this photograph by a renowned nature photographer and world expert on gorillas (who once spent 19 days in a tree waiting to photograph one) failed to convince other jury members to take it through.



2nd Prize General News, Stories (World Press Photo of the Year): Tim Hetherington, UK. US soldier, Korengal Valley, Afghanistan

The fifth and final photograph, a portrait of an exhausted soldier, was taken during a battle in Afghanistan against Taliban forces. It is a stolen image, catching the young American off guard as he wipes the sweat from his forehead with one hand. The blurred focus, and pixelated JPEG compression make this image feel accidental and urgent, aesthetic codes that translate as 'Real'. For some members of the jury it was also 'painterly'—a vague term often used to describe photographs that reference certain painting techniques; the lighting of a Rembrandt portrait or Caravaggio's techniques of Chiaroscuro, the sublime light of a Turner or a Friedrich. All conventions that help us to identify the photograph as something 'beautiful'.

As with the Madonna and child photograph this is a predictable World Press winner; an amalgam of all the images of war and death that we have embedded in our memory. It recalls the terror of Don McCullin's marine during the Battle of Hue in 1968, the resignation of the wounded marine in Larry Burrows' image taken in South Vietnam in 1966, the urgency of Capa's Republican soldier dying in 1936. The images referents go further back; the shape and stance of the soldier clearly reminds us of Goya's Disaster's of War etchings of 1863. It seems we are casting the world in the same mould over and over again.

Tim Hetherington, who took this photograph, later told us the following illuminating anecdote. His photographs were first published by Vanity Fair who also happened to be running a feature on Francis Ford Coppola in the same edition. Both Tim's photographs from Afghanistan and stills from Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* were being printed on the office zerox machine. A staff writer came to collect the fictional stills and accidentally walked away with the real thing.

A resemblance to the famous Vietnam images by Burrows and McCullin, is not coincidental – this image represents a nostalgia for the days of photojournalism at it's sexiest, most lucrative and effective; the days when the press image was morally significant. In order to take a photograph like this these days the photographer must be embedded with the American forces. Although censorship has eased since the Gulf War, the US military still attempts to control representation of American casualties, bodybags, the funerals of servicemen and prisoners. Publications are offered access to troops with a tacit understanding that certain images will not be reproduced. Indeed, a study in the Los Angeles Times found that between September 11th 2004 and February 28 2005, neither that paper, nor the New York Times, The Washington Post, Time Magazine or Newsweek, published a single picture of a dead American soldier^(vii). News corporations always

concerned to keep major advertisers happy, operate what has been termed 'privatised censorship'.

This is important because war photographers have a tendency to think of themselves as anti-war photographers, operating outside of the machinery of conflict. James Nachtwey who has photographed in conflict zones for almost three decades qualifies this as follows. "At the very beginning, I think I was still interested in the dynamics of war itself as a kind of fascinating study. And it evolved into more of a mission whereby I think to present pictures of situations that are unacceptable in human terms became a form of protest. So I found that my pictures were actually specifically trying to mitigate against the war itself..."^(viii) Sadly the photographers' intention does not always inform the meaning of a photograph and it is hard to see how the images produced by Nachtwey or this years' winning picture can be perceived as critical of war. What makes the profession a secure one, and what ultimately nullifies the political force of any of the images, is its reliance on one pretty dependable thing – the world's permanent state of war. As Sontag remarks, "War making and picture taking are congruent activities".^(ix)

Hypocritically, the ethical debate about the image of the Thai prostitute was conspicuously absent when the setting changed to a conflict zone. Another image submitted to this years' competition illustrates the point. It shows a portrait of a dead man lying on a hospital bed with his head in a plastic bag, a victim of a suicide attack in Iraq. Here the angle of the camera, the proximity of the photographer mirrors exactly the portrait of the prostitute. Yet significantly we the jury failed to make the same demands; Who is this guy? Did the photographer have permission? What was the agreement? Did money change hands? As we know by now, we are far more likely to get a full frontal of the dead if they are not from anywhere near where we come from.

In the final analysis we were choosing between a French landscape, a dead guerrilla, an HIV positive mother and an American soldier. A strange task. Rather predictably the majority vote went to Tim Hetherington's soldier. Yet comparing so many diverse images and ultimately declaring one of them a winner feels meaningless. Do we even need to be producing these images any more? Do we need to be looking at them? We have enough of an image archive within our heads to be able to conjure up a representation of any manner of pleasure or horror. Does the photographic image even have a role to play any more? Video footage, downloaded from the internet, conveys the sounds and textures of war like photographs never could. High Definition video cameras create high-resolution images twenty-four photographs a second, eliminating the need to click the shutter. But since we do still demand illustrations to our news then there is a chance to make images that challenge our preconceptions, rather than regurgitate old clichés.

There is one more photograph to consider. It was knocked out of the competition late in the bargaining then brought back at the end for an honourable mention. The photograph depicts a hand painted shooting target, probably made by a member of a German army unit, depicting a lush, green landscape placed in the arid Afghanistan landscape. The photographer highlights the juxtaposition and through this visual strategy suggests that this is perhaps a portrait of a European psychological landscape projected onto the foreign, barren one. An interesting question about the nature of the war starts to form. Compared with the photograph taken during Bhutto's assassination this mode of image-making transforms the photojournalist from an event-gathering machine, into something slightly more intelligent, more reflective and more analytical about our world, the world of images and about the place where these two worlds collide. As Tod Papageorge, photographer and professor of photography at Yale University recently remarked in a live debate at the New York Public Library, "If your pictures are not good enough, you aren't reading enough".^(x) Perhaps this re-working of Capa's oft repeated mantra offers a clue towards a new language in photojournalism – one that presents images that are more aware of what they fail to show; images that communicate the impossibility of representing the pain and horror of personal tragedy.



Honourable Mention, General News. Christoph Bangert, Laif for Stern. German army sniper practice target, Kunduz, Afghanistan

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Resources Links:

Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin - www.choppedliver.info

World Press Photo - www.worldpressphoto.nl

Tim Hetherington - www.mentalpicture.org

Justin Maxon - www.justinmaxon.com

Stanley Greene - www.noorphoto.com

Jean Revillard - www.rezo.ch

Christoph Bangert - www.christophbangert.com

----- Notes -----

(i) The epitaph on Man Ray's grave.

(ii) Wim Wenders: The Act of Seeing (Faber and Faber, London, 1997) in David Levis Strauss: Between The Eyes, Essays on photography and politics. (Aperture Foundation, New York, 2003) p.1.

(iii) From the tenth anniversary issue of A-I-Z magazine in Douglas Kahn, John Heartfield: Art & Mass Media (Tanam Press, New York, 1985) p.64 in Ibid., p.15.

(iv) Regarding The Pain of Others, Susan Sontag (Penguin, London, 2003). P.9.

(v) Ibid., P.105.

(vi) Roland Barthes, The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies (New York, Hill and Wang, 1979) p.71. quoted in Body Horror: photojournalism, catastrophe and war by John Taylor (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1988) p.17.

(vii) Beautiful Suffering: Photography and the traffic of pain. Edited Mark Reinhardt, Holly Edwards and Erina Duganne. Williams College Museum of Art/The University of Chicago Press. P. 18

(viii) From a transcript of James Nachtwey in conversation with Elizabeth Farnsworth, a NewsHour with Jim Lehrer production for PBS.

(ix) Regarding The Pain of Others, Susan Sontag (Penguin, London, 2003). P.66.


(x) "Collapsing images" A talk hosted by Blind Spot at The New York Public Library on November 3, 2007. Part III of the series Truth and Authenticity in Photography".

----- Notes -----

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