

COUNTERFORCE TOWARD SIMPLIFICATIONS

“

DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY IS AMONG THE HARDEST, AND MOST REWARDING PROFESSIONS THERE IS” – CLAIMS PHOTOJOURNALIST PAUL HANSEN. ALTHOUGH HIS LABOUR HAS BEEN REWARDED MANY TIMES, INCLUDING WINNING THE WORLD PRESS PHOTO 2012 CONTEST, HE DID NOT AVOID SOME CONTROVERSY – CONNECTED NOT ONLY WITH EMOTIONALLY CHALLENGING SITUATIONS WHICH HE DOCUMENTS, BUT ALSO WITH SOME DETAILS OF THE ART OF REPORTING.

INTERVIEW WITH **PAUL HANSEN**
BY ELIZA KANIA

You started to work as a photojournalist/reporter a few decades ago. If you could compare this situation to recent digital media world what was the most significant shift from the pre-digital era?

Speed and global impact – which sometimes affect the credibility and relevance of the reported news negatively.

If we consider that the technological revolution gave us an access to unlimited number of information and sources, what is more important for a photojournalist/reporter nowadays – to present a more realistic vision of reality, or to transfer a filtered vision of the situation described?

However big your information gathering capabilities are or how many sources you have - the information you present is in a sense always filtered by yourself and the media you work for. For example, the news that 5 Swedes are killed in Afghanistan would not have the same impact if they were for example German or British. However, to report as realistically and truthful as possible should always be the ambition.

After your picture, which shows a group of men carrying the bodies of two dead children through a street in Gaza City, won World Press Photo contest (World Press Photo of The Year 2012), you've met some controversy over postproduction of the photo. The problem was connected with the fact that some areas have been made lighter and others darker. Why did using popular photo postproduction tools lead to such a discussion?

The camera's digital sensibility and capacity to record light is set by a technician and does not reflect the situation - as the eye sees it. Today most photographers use the age-old "darkroom-technique," but of course nowadays with a computer – to expand the loss of dynamic range. The credibility and integrity of the picture you mention have been examined by four different groups of world experts in the field of photography. The World Press Photo jury, NPPA jury, POYi jury and the Swedish Picture of the Year jury. It has also been forensically examined, pixel by pixel, by two independent computer experts in the United States and The Netherlands. They have all found the integrity of the picture intact and that the post-processing (dark-room work) is within acceptable limits. The photograph was subsequently awarded seven different awards if memory serves me correctly. I can't think of many photographs that have been through a more thorough process.

In 2010 you published the photo of dead Haitian girl, Fabienne Cherisma. Fabienne's photo proved to be quite controversial and a lot of photo reporters were interested in photographing this situation. We could even watch the photo of the group of photographers, taking pictures of the dead girl...

I had a choice, to tell Fabienne's story or tell another story. I chose to tell her story. You write that "we could even watch a photo of the group of photographers, taking pictures of the dead girl." I also took photographs of the group of photographers. But I made the choice to transmit Fabienne's story, not a photo of the group – just like I would not have sent home a picture of a group of reporters working. I think it was a good thing, that the eyes of the world (the photojournalists) recorded what happened in Haiti. If the photojournalists from the Sunday Times, Dagens Nyheter, AP, Reuters and others would not have been working – Fabienne's death would have not been recorded. Since her death I have, together with the reporter Michael Winiarski, been back to see Fabienne's family to do follow up stories seven times.

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Your photos strike with the poetical sensibility, it seems that it is possible to understand all the drama of situation presented in frame. How to choose this particular moment?

To answer that question I would like to make a comparison with written text. Just like when I write a story I interpret the world. The event, what I see, what I hear with the filter-construction that is a part of me. Or rather, is me. After the interpretation I choose words, I string them together to sentences to interpret and describe what I see. The same thing is true with visual storytelling. To describe what I mean I would like to use the words that Luc Sante used to describe James Nachtwey's work:

"It is disquieting to notice, though, that Nachtwey's pictures are always compositions. Maybe we expect that the photographer faced

with grief, trauma or starvation will be rendered incompetent by the sight just as we would be incapable of finding appropriate words to describe such a scene. Maybe it seems that the only moral option, short of capping the lens, would be to take haphazard, ill-focused snapshots – perhaps we think so because of the latent horror that seems to reside in bad snapshots as a result of their association with courtroom evidence and other raw documentation. But maybe we are just projecting, wanting the camera to fall away just as we would. Nachtwey's photographs are always clear and striking compositions in part because he is honest and clear in his stance. There might be an axiom lurking here, by analogy with Flaubert's contention that the greatest compression of thought always results in a line of poetry – that the clearest vision is always balanced."¹

Is it possible to provide high quality journalism to a wider range of readers, in the times of the "terror of immediacy?"

Yes, if you prioritize correctly.

Which statement is more connected with reality: that the public is influencing the quality of journalism more than the journalists the demands and tastes of the public, or quite the opposite?

I think it goes both ways. I also think that even if the media should always be aware of what the public discourse is like – it should never loose track of its primary mission. To inform the public and to be a counterforce towards intellectualism and simplification. The building blocks of evil.

How to combine high-quality and responsible content with the demands of the journalism of new era?

To be aware of the dangers of the constant updating cycle's pitfalls as well as prioritize.

Do you think the level of trust in the media from a public standpoint has dropped lately? Or due to the wider variety of sources and that we can choose and make our own claims it makes the trust towards media more

No. I don't think that the level of trust has gone down. To the contrary,

¹ Sante 2003.

the media that has a credible track record are more trusted and in demand than ever – due to the global flow of rumors, half-truths and irrelevant “news.”

What kind of relations you want to highlight in your works from Ukraine?

As always, if possible, the impact of the violence and uncertainty toward normal people.

What is your opinion on international media dispatches from Ukraine lately? Are there some lacks of oversight in these materials?

No opinion, I do not have the overview to have an opinion. The Swedish media that I follow closely are very good though. Like I wrote earlier, in a situation/area like this the conflict is not only fought on the ground. It is very much fought with disinformation. We try to counterbalance that.

How would you define journalistic responsibility in the world of new, digitalized media?

To inform people of what is going on in the world, to shine a light in the dark corners of the human existence as well as being credible, accurate and fair in the reporting of news.

So, finally I would like to ask, what is – in your opinion - the most difficult in such profession like photo reporting? And why have you decided to choose it?

I write as well as take pictures. The most difficult thing is always to try to convey and interpret an often complex situation into a one dimensional image. When I write the challenge looks different. I think documentary photography is among the hardest, and most rewarding professions there is. I get to meet people all over the world and tell their story – whether it is around the corner in Stockholm or in an alley in Slavyansk doesn't matter.

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Paul Hansen is a photojournalist based in Stockholm, Sweden. He is a staff photographer for the daily newspaper Dagens Nyheter. He covered many events all over the world (Haiti, Bosnia, Afghanistan, Ukraine and many others) He won many awards, including “Photographer of the year Newspaper” in POYi 2010 and 2013, and “World Press Photo, 2012 for the famous and widely discussed picture of “Gaza Funeral”.

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