

London, Hayward Gallery, “In Our Time: The World as seen by Magnum Photographers”

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For many years Magnum has been one of the foremost agencies of photojournalism. Cartier-Bresson and Capa, among its founders, established for the agency a reputation for producing extraordinary images, one which it has maintained and which is still largely unequalled. From its founding in 1947 Magnum's insistence that the copyright of negatives should remain with the photographer and its attempts to control the context of publication marked it off from other organizations.

It is immediately apparent that this exhibition will not let the viewer off lightly. Many of the images deal with unmitigatedly grim, often disturbing subject matter, and the gaze of photographers like Sebastião Salgado is unflinching even in the face of the worst obscenities. If we go with the expectation that these photographs deal only with exotic, distant locations or the great (almost mythic) events of history, Gilles Peress' *Bloody Sunday* (1971) serves as a useful corrective. It shows the corpse of a British demonstrator, shot through the head by a British soldier, his blood in this black and white photo the colour of ink.

The exhibition is finely organized into broad themes which establish connections and weave currents of continuity throughout. One of the first rooms for instance shows the work of photographers who were later to join Magnum and encompasses the Spanish Civil War, the Second World War and aspects of the liberation. Other themes (the asylum for instance but also lighter strands like pictures of pets) run intermittently through the entire exhibition. Warmth and humour to some extent offset violence and poverty.



The Surrealist influence on Magnum is well documented in the case of Henri Cartier-Bresson¹ and specific references to Surrealism are found in more recent pictures. For instance in Raymond Depardon's *Asylum, Turin* (1979) an inmate appears literally and appropriately as an *acéphale*. Surrealist references are also apparent in much lighter pieces; Burk Uzzle's *Outside of Tiffany's, New York* (1981) where a cut-out figure is being manhandled or Guy Le Querrec's faceless bride, a wrapped and veiled object blowing in the wind in *Villejuif* (1975).

There is a sense in which these photographs are found objects, or more accurately recordings of found events. The concept of the decisive moment and the photojournalist's almost mystical attachment to luck are also close to Surrealist theory for there is a shared assumption that chance can reveal a deeper significance. The work of Capa and Cartier-Bresson are often contrasted, the former having a more immediate and topical aspect, the latter being more structured and distant from its subjects. But their overall projects are very similar. While Capa looked to extreme situations of violence and emotion, Cartier-Bresson looked for chance formal arrangements that would be significant. Both set out to seize random formations that would in some reveal meaning. Magnum photographers continue this task. Bert Glinn said that the great photograph should not say *something* about its subject but everything.² When juxtaposed the contingencies that photography records act

like metaphors, unforeseen combinations which disrupt rational categories. The very general captions that are often used for these pictures contribute to non-specific readings.

Furthermore subject matter matches method. The focus is often on subjects which are in some way beyond the rational norm; “primitives”, animals, children, those deranged by illness or great emotion, and those on the margins (gang members and crack addicts). In all these subjects the loss of reason is evident.

The generalized nature of the photojournalistic project is demonstrated by Magnum’s aim to free the photographer from the restrictions of commissioning. One of the best features of the exhibition however is the displays of magazines where the pictures were published, enabling the viewer to judge the use to which the image was put and the difference made to it by its new context in the gallery.³



Unexpectedly there are moments where the medium itself becomes visible, in the cracked emulsion, scratches and stains caused by water damage to Capa's old picture of Trotsky orating, or in Steele-Perkin's *Memorial photograph of a young Palestinian* (1982) with its surface of shattered glass, or in the innovative flash pictures of Michael Nichols. Many images are in some way self referential, strongly featuring other photographs and so blurring the line between the real and the represented; of course the Steele-Perkins acts in this way and also pieces like Gilles Peress' *Pro-Ayatollah Shariat-madari demonstrations* (1980), which neatly divides reality and representation into quarters.

Sometimes the subjects' stress or objection to being photographed is apparent as in Harry Gruyaert's *Essaronira, Morocco* (1976) where a woman covers her face to avoid being photographed. Sometimes it is as if the subjects are the victims of violence from both an oppressor and the photographer. At the start of the exhibition where there is a slide show, the only picture in the large space is Elliot Erwitt's photograph of the Magnum group's annual meeting (Paris 1985). Most of the photojournalists are covering their faces with their hands or gesture as if to take pictures back at the camera, while some peep from behind their fingers. This picture says much about the members' awareness of the status of the subject in photography. If Magnum has lost some of the excitement of its early days this may be due not only to the loss of the preeminence of the still photograph in documentary reporting and the marginal nature of publication in the "quality" supplements, but also to doubts about the nature of its overall project and its relation to its subjects.

"In Our Time: the World as seen by Magnum Photographers" can be seen at the Hayward Gallery until 6 May 1990. It was organized by the American Federation of Arts, the Minneapolis Institute of Arts and the Centre Nationale de la Photographie, Paris.

¹. New York, Museum of Modern Art, *Henri Cartier-Bresson: the early work*, 1987, essay by Peter Galassi.

². This is quoted in Fred Ritchin's essay in the book accompanying the exhibition: William Manchester, *In Our Time: the World as seen by Magnum Photographers*, with essays by Jean Lacouture and Fred Ritchin. (American Federation of Arts/Hayward Gallery, London 1989.) 456 p. + 120 col. pls. + 280 b&w ill. ISBN 0 233 985026.

³. Fred Ritchin's catalogue essay "What is Magnum?" deals with some of these issues of publication.