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The Single Image Narrative: Sometimes It Chooses You

Image: Al Pacino in Sidney Lumet's 1975 film Dog Day Afternoon

I recently wrote an article for World Press Photo exploring the issues many photographers have in creating a visual narrative with their work. In short the difficulty of finding, defining and telling a story with photographs. It seems to have hit a nerve and sparked the interest of many photographers receiving over 32 thousand views in just a few weeks. You can find it here <https://witness.worldpressphoto.org/why-is-narrative-such-a-difficult-concept-for-young-photographers-to-master-ccef10fb1064#.kw8d7n4by>.

Amongst the many informed and considered comments made concerning the article was one by a photographer who suggested

that he would be interested in my thoughts on narrative within the single image, something I have been giving much consideration to over the years and so I replied that I would be looking at this aspect of narrative in a future article.

Then this week something happened that was so shocking and immediate that I felt compelled to write that proposed article now.

There are times as a photographer when we deliberately set out to find a story and times when a story evolves from our interests and practice but there are also those moments when a story is forced upon us. That situation occurred this week to Associated Press photographer Burhan Ozbilici as he explained.

“The event was routine enough—the opening of an exhibit of photographs of Russia—and when a man on stage pulled out a gun I thought it was a theatrical flourish. It was anything but. Moments later the Russian ambassador was sprawled on the floor and the attacker was waving his gun at the rest of us, shouting slogans. Guests ran for cover, hiding behind columns and under tables. I composed myself enough to shoot pictures.”*

The resulting image tells that story, it's hyper digital clarity creating a cinematic news image for our times. The narrative is clear, shocking and deeply affecting in its emotional coldness.

I first saw it on Twitter as so many people did, an environment that showcases the single image with an immediacy that forces interaction. I clicked off. I couldn't take-in the reality of what I was seeing. I took a moment and chose to see both the image and the story on the BBC News app. I needed to understand if what I had seen was real, I needed an explanation for what I had seen, I needed context. Over the following days 'that' image has become lodged within my photographic mind library.

Part *Reservoir Dogs* (the suit, the stance), part *Dog Day Afternoon* (the attitude, the anger, the cry to the media), it has none of the visceral horror of the images of the shooting of John F. Kennedy and subsequently Lee Harvey Oswald or Bill Eppridge's images of the murder of Robert Kennedy. What it does have is the cold reality of a situation, of a narrative unfolding, a movie still appropriate for mass media consumption. We can see what has happened and what is happening but there is also space within the image for us to write our own narrative. It is that space that I find so disconcerting.

I was immediately reminded of *Falling Man* an image created by another Associated Press photographer Richard Drew of a man falling from the North Tower of the World Trade Center during the September 11 attacks in New York City in 2001. I still have trouble looking at that image. Actually that's not true, I cannot look at that image.

I cannot help myself from writing the narrative for that image within my head. Who he is, what his thoughts were before he jumped and whilst falling and the inevitable conclusion to his fall. It is a narrative that I do not want to write but it exists within that image, it's there if you want to read it.

Before I saw Ozbilici's image I was intending to base my article on single image narrative on the ability of a successful photograph to invite you into its world and encourage you to travel through it. I love images and photographers that are able to do that. It is the ability to see a situation, identify the central element of an image and create a subliminal structure created from shape, form, colour and juxtaposition that takes the viewer on a journey through the image to that central element, all within the split second of image capture.

This to me is the foundation of single image narrative created in the moment but the long form constructed narrative image has its place within photography also and the work of Jeff Wall, Gregory Crewdson, Helen van Meene and Philip-Lorca diCorcia immediately comes to mind (I'm sure that you can suggest many more), but as viewers we know that what we are being presented in this work are constructed narratives, fiction rather than fact.

I began to understand the difference between these two forms of visual narrative the first time I saw William Eggleston's images in the solo exhibition of his work *Ancient and Modern*, at the Barbican Art Gallery, London back in 1992. My understanding of photography at the time was limited and divorced from my understanding of other art forms. However, a tour of the exhibition with its curator soon had me understanding both the intention and reality of Eggleston's work and of course his sense of narrative. Stills from a film yet to be made.

Some images feel like that and others seem to contain a complete screenplay within one frame like the work of Henri Cartier-Bresson or Joel Sternfeld, Lee Friedlander or Sally Mann for example. But this week my attention was drawn to an image that demonstrated a filmic sense, a dark narrative. As the art critic Jerry Saltz commented in his excellent analysis of the Ankara images "It's a new surrealism of modern life, made all the more harrowing because it could not be more truly real"**.

It is that filmic sense of reality that informs all great single image narratives including Ozbilici's image and *Falling Man* it's just that I wish that some films had never been made.

*This quote is from an extended personal account by Ozbilici https://blog.ap.org/behind-the-news/ap-photographer-i-composed-myself-enough-to-shoot-pictures?utm_campaign=SocialFlow&utm_source=Twitter&utm_medium=Twitter

[m_medium=AP_CorpComm](#)

** You can read the rest of Jerry Saltz's analysis

here <http://www.vulture.com/2016/12/those-harrowing-ankara-assassination-photos.html>