

The World in Pieces

In the blink of a shutter, photography has the power to document our fragmented world and capture its elusiveness.

by Michael Ignatieff

Photography compresses complex moments of suffering and injustice—which have long and ambiguous histories—into necessarily simplified and abstracted visual icons. We always think photography tells us more than it does. We always think we understand more than we do when we look at a photograph. The reality is that we do not know the people in the photographs; the photographers themselves often do not even know the names of the people whose suffering or elation or terror they are recording. Their photography documents the distance between strangers, between the scream being uttered and going unheard, between the hand reaching out for help and failing to receive any.

But because of photography, our moral imagination is extended to situations we have never been in ourselves. Ignorance is no longer a plausible alibi in a world made transparent by imagery. If we have not done what we should with our knowledge, if we have not acted as we might have done and made our leaders act as they should, we cannot blame our messengers.

Despite the coming of television and the demise of the photoweeklies, photography has retained its ability to define the essential iconography of key historical experiences. Television only seems to tell us everything we need to know. It drains reality of mystery by suggesting that what we see is all there is. Good photography restores the mystery of the world by stopping time so that we can both see and reflect upon what is there. Hence the unending strangeness of photography: that it documents the world, establishes what is essentially there, while at the same time showing to us what we cannot see with our eyes alone. If photography has a redeeming or cleansing effect on our vision, it is because it seems to restore both the reality of the world and its essential elusiveness.

In 1954, the photographer Edward Steichen assembled the *Family of Man* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The hydrogen bomb, just then tested by both America and the Soviet Union, gave frantic urgency to the exhibition's affirmation of human universality. Few photographers today would lay

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Kosovar refugees leaving Albania, April 1999, by Nikos Economopoulos

claim to the ideal of trying to show that human beings are the same underneath the skin. They seem intent chiefly on representing the modern world in all its fragmented, perplexed confusion. The world is in pieces: there are no Cold War mastodons left to oppose, no certainties to align oneself with. So be it, the image makers seem to be saying. Let us go out and see the world. These photographers do not want to affirm, just look; do not want to speak out, just observe; do not want to convince or persuade, just show. The purpose of photography is not political or moral or anything else; the purpose of photography is photography. End of story.

Photographers today work within a visual field dominated by the digitized video image. Sometimes they have to work against the visual field, salvaging something still and permanent from the ceaseless data stream. Sometimes, the stills photographers work with the new aesthetics made possible by the new media. They take for granted the new aesthetics of a video world: the off-center framing, the graininess, the strange, eccentric juxtaposition of images, the deliberate loss of context, the strange, degraded colors. Again, television does not stop to pause over strangeness and incongruity, so instead of being crowded out, stills photographers often have whole fields of our strange new visual world all to themselves.

These juxtapositions and oddities are the visual essence of uneven development in globalization: how new and old, modern, postmodern, and ancient coexist in the same frame. It is all there, like the fragments of some gigantic puzzle we collect in the hope that one day we might be able to assemble it into a discernible pattern. But the pattern escapes us now. It is too close. The photographers, like us, are too close to know what it means, but the act of taking the pictures implies, even in the most forlorn or hopeless context, that one day the shape of our fragmented time will be discernible and that their images will disclose some of the secrets of what we have lived through. □