

Critical Biography of James Nachtwey

Since his first foreign assignment covering the IRA hunger strike in Northern Ireland, photojournalist James Nachtwey has devoted himself to documenting war, famine, genocide, and other critical social issues in hopes that his images will provoke real change. “His goal is to bear witness, because someone must, and his pictures, devised to infuriate and move people to action, are finally about us, and our concern or lack of it, at least as much they are about him and his obvious talents” (Kimmelman 1).

As a student in the 1960s, Nachtwey was profoundly moved by documentary images. In his speech at the 2007 TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) conference, Nachtwey said the following:

The war in Vietnam was raging and the Civil Rights Movement was underway and pictures had a powerful influence on me. Our political and military leaders were telling us one thing and photographers were telling another. I believed the photographers and so did millions of other Americans. Their images fueled resistance to the war and to racism. They not only recorded history, they helped change the course of history. Their pictures became part of our collective consciousness, and as consciousness evolved into a shared sense of conscious, change became not only possible, but inevitable. I saw that the free flow of information represented by journalism, specifically visual journalism, can bring into focus both the benefits and the cost of political policies. It can

give credit to sound decision-making, adding momentum to success. In the face of poor political judgment or political inaction, it becomes a kind of intervention, assessing the damage and asking us to reassess our behavior. It puts a human face on issues that from afar can appear abstract or ideological or monumental in their global impact. What happens at ground level, far from the halls of power, happens to ordinary citizens, one by one. And I understood that documentary photography has the ability to interpret events from their point of view. It gives a voice to those who would otherwise not have a voice.

It was this ability to give a voice to the voiceless that ultimately motivated Nachtwey to become a photojournalist. After Nachtwey graduated from Dartmouth College with degrees in art history and political science, he had a series of odd jobs including serving as a merchant marine, an apprentice news film editor, and a truck driver, acquiring skills that would prove useful in his chosen occupation. During this time he began teaching himself photography. He also paid close attention, and learned from the work of other photojournalists, such as Henri Cartier-Bresson, Gene Smith, Josef Koudelka, and Don McCullin.

Nachtwey landed his first job as a photographer in 1976, working for a local New Mexico newspaper. Four years later, finally convinced he was ready to be a war photographer, he moved to New York City.

In 1981, Nachtwey traveled to Belfast to cover the Irish Republican Army (IRA) hunger strike. Ten IRA prisoners were in the process of starving

themselves to death to protest the conditions inside the jail. The reaction on the streets was violent confrontation. "I saw that the frontlines of contemporary wars are not on isolated battlefields, but right where people live," Nachtwey says.

During the 1980s, Nachtwey spent a lot of time in Central America, which was engulfed in civil war. And just as in Northern Ireland, the civilian population was caught up in the conflict.

"In the 1990s, after the breakup of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia fractured along ethnic fault lines and civil war broke out between Bosnia, Croatia, and Serbia," says Nachtwey.

At the same time in South Africa, after Nelson Mandela's prison release, the black population was liberated from the chains of apartheid. Nachtwey was welcomed in the black townships in South Africa and says he was impressed by their hospitality and openness.

Elsewhere in Africa, famine in Somalia and southern Sudan was used as a weapon of mass destruction, killing hundreds of thousands of civilians, slowly and painfully.

In 1994, Nachtwey returned to South Africa. He says witnessing the inauguration of Nelson Mandela in 1994 election was the most uplifting story of Nachtwey career. Sadly, "the danger inherent in Nachtwey's work became especially apparent during his assignment in South Africa, when a group of journalists was fired upon. Nachtwey was attempting to aid his friend and colleague Ken Oosterbroek, who had been shot, when a bullet came so close to

Nachtwey that it parted his hair. Oosterbroek had been fatally wounded” (Whitney).

After spending nearly a year in South Africa, Nachtwey traveled to Rwanda. He described the experience as “taking the express elevator to hell.” Nachtwey said that this time, perhaps confused or discouraged by the military disaster in Somalia, the International community remained silent, and “somewhere around 800, 000 people were slaughtered by their own countrymen, sometimes their own neighbors, using farm implements as weapons.”

Though he continues to document war, Nachtwey also devotes a great deal of his time and energy to documenting other social issues such as Romania’s lost children, India’s “Untouchables,” the effects of Industrial pollution and Agent Orange, homeless youth in Indonesia, and heroin addicts in Pakistan. When he is unable to get any of the news publications he usually works for interested in the critical social issues he wants to cover, he goes on his own steam, without an assignment. Nachtwey paid his own way to Somalia to cover the famine and to Romania to cover the orphanages for “incurables.” Thanks to Nachtwey, both stories got the mainstream media coverage they so desperately needed.

In 1998, Nachtwey traveled to Indonesia to examine the extreme poverty in a country that was on its way towards modernization. During the rule of President Soeharto, “Indonesia suffered from the Asian financial and economic crisis, accompanied by the worst drought in 50 years and falling prices for oil, gas, and other commodity exports ... the rupiah depreciated in value, inflation

increased significantly, and capital flight accelerated. Demonstrators, initially led by students, called for Soeharto's resignation. Amid widespread civil unrest, Soeharto resigned on May 21, 1998" ("Background Note: Indonesia").

The conditions of poverty Nachtwey documented in Indonesia were hardly an isolated occurrence. "For many throughout the postcolonial world, the struggle to enter the modern global economy has resulted in more extreme poverty, deteriorating public health, and an escalation of armed conflict" (Gourevitch 56).

As is almost always the case, the children suffer most. "The homeless, glue-sniffing street children James Nachtwey found and photographed in a Jakarta train station are hardly an anomalous phenomenon of some Indonesian netherworld. Children like them are ubiquitous throughout the urban slums of Asia, Africa, and Latin America—the lost souls heaved up and stranded by massive social and political transformations" (Gourevitch 56).



Nachtwey's "Homeless in Jakarta" (pictured above) depicts four young homeless boys sleeping on the hard-tiled floor of a Jakarta train station, as a

businessman in dark trousers hurries to catch his train, briefcase in hand, completely unfazed by the boys. Barefoot and vulnerable, the boys lay horizontally, like discarded carcasses. Lured by the wealth of modern cities, these boys moved to Jakarta from the countryside. They ended up beggars, thieves, and drug addicts living in a train station. “They were truly outcasts, surviving on the narrowest of margins, and as such were virtually invisible,” Nachtwey says.

“Homeless in Jakarta” demonstrates the contrast between two worlds. A shadow divides the composition in half. On the left, in the light, we see a world of prosperity. On the right-hand side of the composition, we see a world of poverty, living in the shadows.

They are not so different than Romania’s lost children, tethered to a shared crib or India’s “Untouchables,” scavenging in a waste dump among vultures. They are invisible, which is why they are Nachtwey’s focus. These children did not create the conditions of their plight. They are not responsible for the suffering they endure.

“These are not the victims of natural cataclysms, these are the victims of human greed for power, violence, stupidity, and of man’s destructive impulses. We are our own nightmare even if we pretend to ignore it” (Chalifour 5).

Nachtwey makes it his purpose to see that we don’t ignore the victims of war, famine, disease, and other critical social injustices. Nachtwey wrote the following about the relevance of photojournalism:

It has occurred to me that if everyone could be there just once to see for themselves what white phosphorous does to the face of a child or what unspeakable pain is caused by the impact of a single bullet or how a jagged piece of shrapnel can rip someone's leg off—if everyone could be there to see for themselves the fear and the grief, just one time, then they would understand that nothing is worth letting things get to the point where that happens to even one person, let alone thousands. But everyone cannot be there, and that is why photographers go there—to show them, to reach out and grab them and make them stop what they are doing and pay attention to what is going on—to create pictures powerful enough to overcome the diluting effects of the mass media and shake people out of their indifference—to protest and by the strength of that protest to make others protest.

He has been a contract photographer with *Time Magazine* since 1984 and regularly has his work published in the form of photo essays. He was associated with Black Star photo agency from 1980 until 1985 and was a member of the Magnum photo agency from 1986 until 2001. In 2001, he became one of the founding members of the VII photo agency. The agency, named for its original seven members, “seeks to compile and disseminate photography of diverse contemporary social, political, and environmental crises and conflicts” (Winston 48).

Nachtwey overcomes whatever technical, physical, and emotional obstacles photojournalists encounter in fieldwork to produce compositions so strong they almost look staged. He aims for a transparency that makes us aware of what he is photographing rather than allowing us to get hung up on appreciating his art. He doesn't care how we receive his images—only that we be made aware of critical social injustices. For this self-proclaimed “anti-war photographer,” content always comes before aesthetics.

But some critics accuse Nachtwey of creating aesthetic wonders rather than an anti-war campaign.

There was sometimes a feeling when Nachtwey was shooting in color that the pictures were almost too pretty, that the overall effect of his mastery of technique might detract from the horror of the subject...but Nachtwey in recent years has turned almost entirely to black and white photography. The more austere medium perfectly suits his strict moral vision, forcing the viewer to confront man's inhumanity in the last, post-cold war decade of the century. (Kifner).

Nachtwey's talents in photography and humanitarian work have been widely recognized. He received numerous awards such as “the Robert Capa Gold Medal (five times), the World Press Photo Award twice, Magazine Photographer of the Year (six times), the International Center of Photography Infinity Award (three times), the Leica Award twice, the Bayeaux Award for War Correspondents (twice), the Alfred Eisenstaedt Award, the Canon Photo essayist

Award, and the W. Eugene Smith Memorial Grant in Humanistic Photography” (“James Nachtwey” 1).

In addition to his numerous awards, Nachtwey was also the subject of the 2002 Oscar Nominated Documentary “The War Photographer” by Swiss filmmaker Christian Frei. The film follows Nachtwey closely for two years—in Kosovo, The Balkans (June 1999), Jakarta, Indonesia (May/June 1999), Ramallah, Palestine (October/November 2000), Kawah Ijen, A Sulfur Mine, in East Java, Indonesia (October 1999) and in New York City and Hamburg.

In the film, Nachtwey describes his artistic journey:

I had to learn, in taking pictures, how to develop a personal vision, how to express my own feelings about it, and in order to do that I had to get in touch with my own feelings. Through photography, through the discipline of the frame, I learned about the world, it became the way in which I discovered the world and it also became the way in which I discovered myself.

Nachtwey has never strayed from the medium of photography, nor has his philosophy of content over aesthetics. He shoots both black and white photographs and color photographs, using Canon products almost exclusively (Cellini 1). “Afghanistan was my first large-scale digital story. It was an odd combination of medieval living conditions and cutting-edge technology,” said Nachtwey in an interview with Joe Cellini. “I learned on the job, sink or swim” (Cellini 2).

Nachtwey describes his preference for film in his interview with Joe Cellini:

I still much prefer to have my originals on film. It's a matter of quality, but also a better way for me to edit and eventually store my images. However, even though I like to shoot film whenever possible, my pictures now always become digitized through scanning. I use the computer to scan, tone and transmit every bit as much as I would if I was shooting my originals on a flashcard. (Cellini 2).

While Nachtwey occasionally exhibits his news images in gallery shows internationally, the bulk of his work is seen in magazines and newspapers. The primary function of Nechtwey's photographs has always been and will continue to be in mass-circulation magazines and newspapers during the time that the events are happening. In an interview with David Cruickshank for *Salon*, Nachtwey says, "I want them to become part of people's daily dialogue and create public awareness, public opinion that can help bring pressure for change. That's the first and most important use of my work. A secondary use is to become an archive, entered into our collective memory, so that these events are never forgotten" (2). His books, which include *Deeds of War* (1989), *Civil Wars* (1999), *Inferno* (2000), *Rethink* (2004), *War* (2004), and *Democratic Republic of Congo: Forgotten War* (2006), were made in a book format so that these images would seep into our collective consciousness. The late Richard Avedon called his book *Inferno* "the most painful and beautiful book in the history of photography" (Kimmelman 1).

Nachtwey's work from around the world and through the years has a consistent story, showing us that something needs to be done. We can watch the news to get a basic idea of what's happening in the world, but Nachtwey's images provide depth. Photojournalist Robert Capa famously said, "If your photographs aren't good enough, you're not close enough." No one could argue that Nachtwey doesn't get close enough. Whether we like it or not, Nachtwey forces us to look closely at the horrors man has made and we're better for it.

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