

Interview with Ryan Christopher Jones

FdR: In your piece in NYT (“*How Photography Exploits the Vulnerable*”) you speak about two responsibilities of photojournalism: to portray the visceral realities of an often devastating world and to maintain the humanity of the people depicted.

Why do you think this second aspect is often missing?

Ryan Christopher Jones: Two reasons: One, because violent and sensationalist photos helped define photojournalism as a genre, and it has been very hard for people to break that tradition. Secondly, because those are photos still get awarded, so there’s a pressure for photojournalists to keep making that work. Of course there’s violence and war all around us and those events need to be covered, but I think many people equate “war photography” with the totality of photojournalism, and that’s of course, inaccurate. When Daniel Berehulak covered the ebola outbreak in Liberia he showed the brutal devastation, but he also photographed a beautiful portrait series on the aid workers *who helped. I want to see more of that humanity, and not only the devastation.*

FdR: Don’t you fear that your attitude could make the pictures less “powerful” and therefore bring the viewer (exposed to a huge stream of images) to the conclusion that the given situation is acceptable?

Ryan Christopher Jones: *I have a huge problem with the premise of that question; it implies that compassionate photos can’t be powerful. It implies that only violent, exploitative pictures can sway public opinion on an issue. Western journalism still thinks its colonialist gaze—predicated on violence and conquest—is the most important way to understand the world, but it’s a very narrow and unsophisticated view of the role of journalism that I fundamentally disagree with. Look at the work of Sim Chi Yin, Lujan Agusti, Todd Heisler, Laylah Amatullah Barrayn, Kholood Eid, Elias Williams, Isadora Kosofsky, Lisa Krantz. Quiet work matters. It can change public opinion, and we need to show audiences that powerful journalism can look and feel many different ways.*

FdR: In your article you concentrate on the opioid crisis topic in the USA. Do you think your thoughts are applicable to other issues? In particular on refugees and war, which are top issues in Europe now ?

Ryan Christopher Jones: It could and should be applied to other issues; the opioid crisis is simply the issue I am closest to in my own work.

Refugees are some of the most vulnerable people, and there are many reasons why it's difficult to cover. Inclusive representation is a good start.

FdR: How can you make sure that any given picture doesn't exploit the vulnerable?

Ryan Christopher Jones: Photos need to be understood within the context of the larger story, which is why single-use photos can be dangerous. They're usually stock photos of anonymous hands cooking or shooting heroin. Captions matter. Names matter. Agency matters. Everyone I photograph knows they're being photographed and have given consent, unlike photos like this, which just use people who use drugs as nameless, faceless props who most likely never consented to being photographed: <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/fentanyl-opioid-heroin-epidemic-getting-worse-717847/>. I will use names so that the audience knows that these are real people who I interacted with. Of course there are some instances where people choose to not be named for privacy or security reasons, and in those cases I talk to my editors about what the best, most accurate and respectful options are for editorial usage.

FdR: Are those in editorial power aware of the issue you underline in your piece. Is there a discussion going on, concerning how photojournalists should tell their stories?

Ryan Christopher Jones: It first started by having a long conversation with my editor at the New York Times, Jeffrey Furticella, about the kind of work I was going to make, and the kind of work I was *not* going to make. We were on the same page about covering the opioid crisis in a way that transcended violence and desperation, and instead hinged on humanity and interpersonal relationships. Since the publication of the op-ed I have heard from a lot of editors and photographers. One editor told me it made the rounds in a private Facebook group for photo editors, and that it was well-received. It's been reassuring to know that those in editorial power are talking about this topic, or at least starting to. From seeing the work that has been published over the years, this conversation has been absent in many editorial conversations, so it's nice to know that hopefully things can start to change for the better.