

TOPIC:

PHOTOGRAPHY



Barletti, Don, Bound to El Norte. 2003 © Los Angeles Times. Reproduced with permission.

RESEARCH QUESTION:

When does photojournalism transcend into art?

APPROACH:

A case study of Don Bartletti's Pulitzer Prize winning work on immigration – “Bound to El Norte”. How does Bartletti integrate art into documentary style reporting? How does he turn human struggle and illegal migration into works of art?

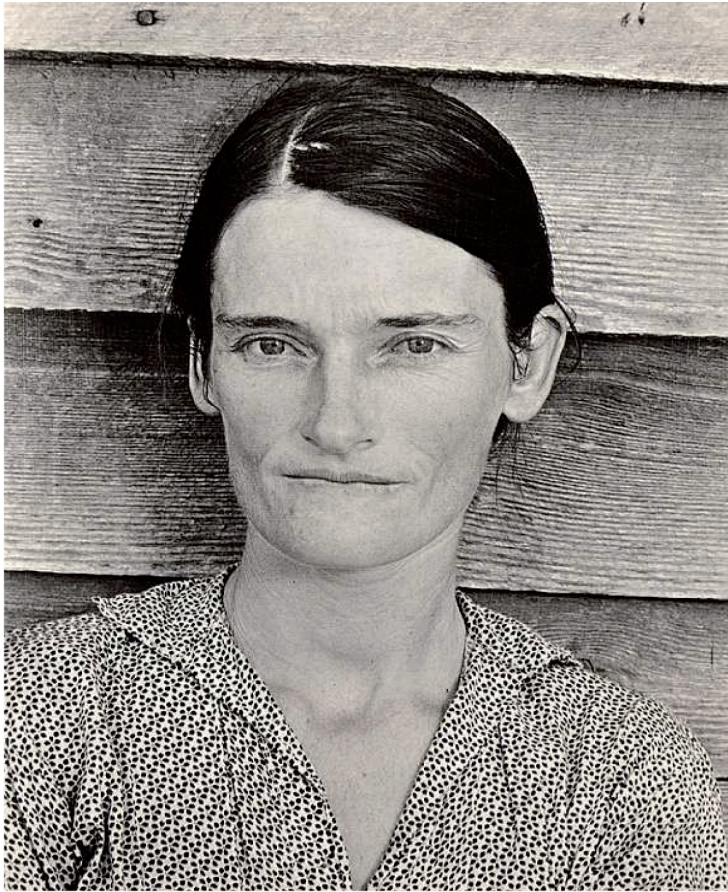
Word Count: 3,984

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Abstract

In this research essay I pondered the indistinct boundary between photojournalism and fine art by conducting a case study of Don Bartletti’s Pulitzer Prize winning photo essay on the human toll of immigration—“Bound to El Norte”. I began by attempting to define fine art photography and photojournalism drawing from my research and personal experience. I then analyzed individual images as well as the collection as a whole in order to determine what characteristics of Bartletti’s photographs allowed them to transcend from photojournalism into fine art. As a result of this analysis I was able to conclude that Bartletti’s mastery of his medium, his human involvement with his subjects, the emotional content of the images, and the careful balance between form and content in his photographs all qualify his photographs as fine art. I then drew cultural and historical connections between his photographs and the work of renowned war artists Francisco Goya and Henry Moore. After finding several similarities between Bartletti and these artists, I was able to reach the conclusion, once again, that his work can be considered fine art. Finally, I questioned whether photojournalism can *always* be considered fine art and realized that this was not the case. I also explored the ethical boundaries of photojournalism and how the transgression of these boundaries as well as the context in which a photograph is viewed determines whether a photograph can be classified as fine art or photojournalism. I reached the general conclusion that although not *all* photojournalism falls under the category of fine art, the most *effective* photojournalism does.

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Evans, Walker. *Portrait of a Tenant Farm Wife*. 1930.

When it comes to photography, the spectrum is very varied. It can be classified under infinite subcategories from commercial, to photojournalism, to fine art. Numerous photographers have dedicated their body of work to depicting harsh social realities. In these cases, fine art photographs double as photo-reportage. Pulitzer Prize winning photojournalist for the LA Times, Don Bartletti explains:

"Courageous men and women who bear witness with the camera create photographs that often define our memory of an event." This statement refers specifically to the role of documentary photojournalism but is also emblematic of documentary fine art photography. Walker Evans' fine art photography of the Great Depression shaped the general public's perception of this historical period just as much as Nick Ut's photograph of the 'Napalm girl' shaped the public's perception of the Vietnam War. Both genres explore means to communicate reality, but what sets them apart? And when does photojournalism transcend into art? In this essay, this question will be tackled through a detailed analysis of Pulitzer Prize winning photographer, Don Bartletti's, striking collection— "Bound to El Norte".



Ut, Nick. *Kim Phuc Phan Thi, Vietnamese Girl Running from Napalm*. 8 June 1972. Nick Ut / *The Associated Press*

Who is Don Bartletti?

Don Bartletti is a Philadelphia born photojournalist who has been employed by the Los Angeles Times for the past 21 years. However, he has worked for numerous southern California newspapers for 32 years. His most recent work focuses on revealing the hardships of immigration across the US-Mexico border— a topic of personal interest as a resident of San Diego. His assignments have brought him to Mexico, Central and South America, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Bartletti graduated from Palomar College, San Marcos, CA where he was an art major. He has been the recipient of more than 50 awards over his career. These include the Pulitzer Prize for Feature Photography in 2003 for his photo essay “Bound to El Norte” which follows the journey of migrant boys attempting to cross the border on freight trains. I chose to focus on this particular body of work as it seamlessly meshes artistic and journalistic quality. My analysis brought up many questions regarding where fine art and photojournalism overlap which I have investigated in this essay.

I have begun by attempting to define fine art photography and photojournalism. I have then used these definitions to determine whether the photographs in “Bound to El Norte” transcend photojournalism into fine art.

As there are no formal and absolute definitions for either term, I have defined fine art photography and photojournalism myself drawing from research and personal experience—

In most cases, photojournalism provides visual support for a written piece. As such, its main focus is content, its main purpose to convey information to the viewer. Conversely, fine art photography, though it can also be informational, requires content to be fused with style. The photograph must be the result of a series of conscious, compositional decisions and must establish a strong connection with the viewer by evoking powerful emotions in him/her.

However, these parameters are not absolute and require further consideration.

The Photographer's Intent and Human Involvement

The question of whether photography can be considered an art at all has been a topic of vehement discussion for centuries. It is difficult to classify under the general umbrella of visual art as it is so different from any other medium. Sculpture, painting, drawing, and other traditional art forms all require a degree of manual dexterity and craft in order to produce a refined end product. However, the development of more technologically advanced cameras, which have turned photography into a much more automated process, make it challenging to gauge how much intention and thought went into crafting an image. Still, in most cases, the machine cannot replace the artist. Just as Michelangelo learned to manipulate marble to produce his famous David, a skilled photographer must know how to work with the camera in order to achieve the desired outcome. A photographer must select the camera lens, perspective, and shutter speed just as carefully as a painter must choose the appropriate paintbrush and brushstrokes to achieve a visual objective. Though it is possible for a successful photograph to be the result of rather randomly pointing and shooting the camera at a subject, this cannot truly be considered art as it lacks the conscious process of making decisions.

Don Bartletti's photographs are most certainly backed up by a great deal of intent. He begins by plunging himself entirely into the topic at hand, talking with reporters and editors in addition to reading around the subject he has been assigned. "It usually takes a lot of time and energy...Planning, experience, the gift of time, and the help of others are essential" (Bartletti). This thorough preparation allows him to identify his focus, the message he wishes to convey to the public. This then influences all the technical decisions he makes in-camera: "I select camera lenses and perspectives very deliberately... I choose a telephoto lens to isolate something from the background or bring a distant subject in close. I use a wide-angle lens most often as it allows me to compose in layers with foreground, middle, and background. The main subject becomes obvious and there's supporting information visible in the distance and the edges of the frame" (Bartletti). His mastery of his medium and purpose in setting up the image make him an artist and distinguish him from a casual photographer as his photographs are the outcome of an elevated degree of technical skill.

Furthermore, Bartletti's use of the camera as a tool does not, in any way, subtract from his human involvement. "I'm not a security camera watching things pass by so I move around a lot, working my way closer to become familiar and non-threatening to the people whose story I want to photograph" (Bartletti). In some

cases, Bartletti goes as far as to put himself in life threatening situations for the sake of a compelling image:

When I want to drive home the horror of the Mexican drug war, I'm relentless in the search for the carnage of a shootout scene and the reaction of citizens living with such insanity. For my continuing documentary project about migration, I put myself among illegal immigrants. From that perspective I see some of what drives them to flee a failed homeland and struggle for something better. In the U.S., I observe how migration changes the status quo, disrupts natives, and is a salvation for many immigrants (Bartletti).

In order to produce his Pulitzer winning series, "Bound to El Norte", he spent months travelling on a dozen different freight trains alongside his subjects. Other migrants taught him how to board and jump off moving trains. LA Times Reporter, Sebastian Rotella, who has worked closely with Bartletti on several assignments recalls an instance in which Bartletti actually had inmates at a Mexican prison helping him lean off the side of a roof in order to get the perspective he wanted (Rotella and Mendez). Evidently, Bartletti's photographs require much more than the simple click of a button.

Emotion in Photojournalism and in Art

Marius De Zayas, an essayist for Camera Work makes the following distinction: "Art presents to us what we may call the emotional or intellectual truth; photography the material truth" (Trachtenberg 129). He argues that photography in its purest sense, which he defines as "the means by which the man of instinct, reason and experience approaches nature in order to attain the evidence of reality," is not art but can *become* art if used to convey emotion (Trachtenberg 129). When man uses a camera to "acquire a truth, which he tries to represent by itself and not by adapting it to any system of emotional representation, then, man is doing Photography [, not art]" (Trachtenberg 129).

Bartletti's photography reflects the material truth (and thus satisfies its role as photojournalism) while also reflecting emotional truth. "Bound to El Norte" is very emotionally charged while accurately witnessing the global issue of immigration. A 12-year-old's decision to leave his home and risk his life in a 19,000 kilometer journey to reunite with his mother is, after all, a decision deeply rooted in human feeling.

Consider the following photograph -



Barletti, Don, Bound to El Norte. 2003 © Los Angeles Times. Reproduced with permission.

The bond between the reunited mother and her child is tangible and the emotion exudes beyond the image, resonating in the viewer. It would be irresponsible photojournalism to *exclude* emotion from photojournalistic coverage of such a topic. Bartletti explains that a photograph is: "really an explanation of history in an international language. A smile, a hug, a cry, sweating, working, laboring are all concepts that we can all universally understand" (Bartletti). As a result, images which convey emotion are perhaps *more* effective in communicating essential concepts in the news than those which don't.

Content and Style

In an interview, I asked Don Bartletti if he considered his own body of work to be art, with specific emphasis on “Bound to El Norte”. He responded, “I believe there are 2 things that make a great photograph: Content and Style” (Bartletti).

Editor of "Cruel and Tender, *The Real in the Twentieth-Century Photograph*", Thomas Weski, explains a similar theory. He states that both form and content are necessary in order for a photograph to fascinate us and draw more than a cursory glance. In his view, those who use photography "purely as a means of factual documentation" (Weski 23) are *not* producing art. In order to produce fine art, photographers must also focus on aesthetics. He specifically mentions photojournalism as an example of photography that is quick to evaporate in our collective memory. He explains that in newspaper photography "complex topics are of necessity narrowed down so that they will work visually in the given context. But compressing the essence of an issue abbreviates the message and, with few exceptions, we soon lose interest" (Weski 23).

Don Bartletti's work is one of these exceptions. His photographs, contrarily to Weski's generalized description of newspaper photography, have magnetism, combining a visual *and* conceptual intensity that keeps viewers involved. One is first drawn to them because they are visually compelling (form), but one goes on to read the article because of their social relevance (content). He explains how he achieves this balance: "I try to find the essence of the subject and I also try to get its style...make a photograph that a newspaper reader might be stopped in his tracks and look and read the caption and perhaps read the story" (Bartletti). Bartletti acknowledges that it is, in fact, a challenge to compress an issue into a single picture, his photographs do not suffer from this and he is ultimately able to achieve images which are rich in substance.

In order to support all the claims which I have made regarding Bartletti's work thus far, I offer an analysis of the following images which belong to “Bound to El Norte”. I have chosen these images in particular because I find them emblematic of the artistic qualities present throughout his body of work.



Barletti, Don, Bound to El Norte. 2003 © Los Angeles Times. Reproduced with permission.

Bartletti explains how this image incorporates both content and style:

The content is, the dirty little boy sitting atop a speeding freight train is worthy of notice and publicity. The style that is my composition is absolutely important as it is simple, and arrests the attention of even a casual newspaper reader. The photograph is a metaphor about children traveling north to the U.S.

The foggy horizon is indistinct like the boy's uncertainty about just where his destination is. He's staring forward, to the north, with his back to those people and circumstances that failed him. The image is slightly painterly, no saturated colors, slightly blurred on the edges to indicate motion. This image satisfies my endless struggle with photojournalism: to make images of lasting editorial importance that are at once beautiful and revealing (Bartletti).



Barletti, Don, Bound to El Norte. 2003 © Los Angeles Times. Reproduced with permission.

This photograph also perfectly fuses form and content:

A teenager standing by the tracks in Veracruz was giving fruit to the stowaways on the freight train as it sped by...The gift, the orange, is crystal clear. The two other hands touching communicate, Thank you, and Go Safely (Bartletti).

Thus, Bartletti makes a series of very conscious decisions in crafting his images – he manipulates his camera like a poet manipulates words to create intricate and moving visual poetry. The viewer must then analyze each element to extract the broader meaning of the image as a whole. On a concrete level we notice the perfect focus of the gift contrasts with the surrounding blur. Abstractly, the gift is a symbol of empathy in the urgency and danger of the migration.

Bartletti's Distinctive Style:



Barletti, Don, Bound to El Norte. 2003 © Los Angeles Times. Reproduced with permission.

Bartletti exhibits distinctive style within the collection "Bound to el Norte". The use of blurring in many of the images serves a factual and artistic role. Firstly, it is a witness of the migrants' journey, both physical and emotional towards the hope of a better future. Secondly, and more literally, it depicts the speed of the freight trains and the danger the travelers are exposed to.



Barletti, Don, Bound to El Norte. 2003 © Los Angeles Times. Reproduced with permission.



Barletti, Don, Bound to El Norte. 2003 © Los Angeles Times. Reproduced with permission.



Barletti, Don, Bound to El Norte. 2003
© Los Angeles Times. Reproduced with permission.

The use of sharply angled perspectives is also unique: In both images the perspective serves to emphasize the determination of the migrants. In the first, the perspective emphasizes the height of the life threatening jump while in the second; the perspective emphasizes the weight which the migrant must bare as he clings to his provisory raft, his gateway towards a new life.

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Barletti, Don, Bound to El Norte. 2003 © Los Angeles Times. Reproduced with permission.

Bartletti's use of silhouettes emphasizes the secrecy of the clandestine migrants who often travel in darkness not knowing what the future holds for them or if they will succeed. The silhouettes, which merely delineate the figures without revealing their faces, build on the theme of the unknown. Furthermore, they give the photographs a melancholy and looming tone which is reflective of the migrants' overall situation. Notice again, the blurred edges of the tunnel indicating transition and the illuminated far off sceneries, symbols of direction and hope.



Barletti, Don, Bound to El Norte. 2003 © Los Angeles Times. Reproduced with permission.

Story Telling Through Photography

I would now like to discuss to what extent the collection as a whole is a work of art. The series is homogenous in that the photographs share common themes: travel, motion, the contrast between the industrial trains and the greenery which surrounds them. Though the specific subjects are not the same in every picture, the collection focuses on young men of about the same age with a common goal.

Journalistic Objectivity vs. Artistic Interpretation

We can all agree that honest photojournalists ought to be objective and should not purposely offer readers flawed, fabricated, or heavily nuanced versions of reality. However, Weski explains that in order for an image to be recognized as visual art, it must be "charged with additional meaning by the photographer's perception" (Weski 23). A fine art photograph must be interpretative to contribute to the formation of a "world view" (Weski 23) rather than simply relaying fact. Bartletti's work fits into this description of fine art photography while still falling under the category of photojournalism. The two are not necessarily mutually exclusive in the sense that while his photographs loyally depict fact (making his work objective), when viewing his images readers undoubtedly see the situation through *his* filter of perception. A reader will certainly perceive a situation differently when looking at Bartletti's images because of his decisions regarding *how* to take the picture (i.e. his perspective) will differ from any other photographer's. Thus his work offers a distinctive world view to readers without offering inaccurate information.

This is evident, in the image "Gift for a Northbound Migrant" (*see page 11). Bartletti had anticipated this act of kindness and very deliberately decided that he wanted to portray it. Another photographer may have deemed such a simple act as uninteresting and moved on. But his firm choice to filter out all other possible photographable material at that point in time to capture this instance shapes our "world view" of immigration. Through this image he is highlighting the underlying human empathy which lies beneath and humanizing the socio-political issue for the viewer.

When Artistic Photojournalism becomes Art Alone

Producing Photojournalism which is also art is not an easy task. Photojournalists have many limitations to what tools they can use to produce their images which fine art photographers do not. With technology progressing as rapidly as it is, Photoshop and other digital editing technologies represent a significant temptation for photojournalists. Though some alterations are acceptable and necessary within the realm of artistic photojournalism, others can change the content and meaning of an image. When this occurs, the photograph can no longer be considered journalistic.

In some cases, the use of Photoshop can actually strengthen photojournalism, compensating for the camera's inability to reproduce reality exactly as we see it. Bartletti explains how he uses Photoshop to this effect:

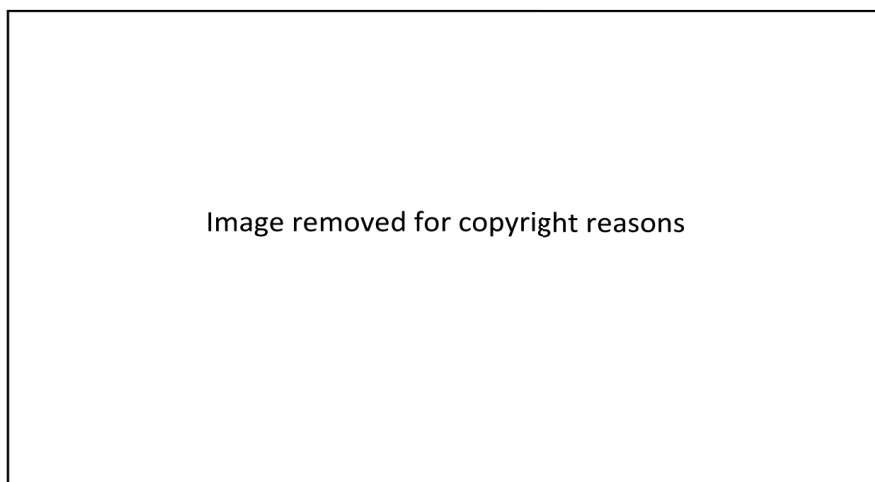
Digital cameras sometimes don't record high contrast scenes to my satisfaction. When that's the case I use adjustment tools in Photoshop to restore detail to the highlights and shadows...I also check for unnatural color. For example a person with light skin who is photographed in the low light of sunset, can appear flushed or red. A blond photographed under florescent lights can have bluish-green hair...It would be unfair to the subject, confusing for the viewer, and unprofessional for me not to filter out those false tones (Bartletti).

He refers to these changes specifically as "corrections", not alterations. Bartletti also explained that photojournalists should not perform any more adjustment on their digital images than they could have achieved in a dark room. This includes darkening, lightening, and cropping. He performs these alterations on almost every image he prepares for publication or the internet.

But the excessive use of any of these alterations chisels away at the objectivity of a news photograph. For instance, Bartletti explains that he would not over saturate colors, over manipulate contrast, darken corners, or convert color files to black and white. Perhaps the most unacceptable manipulation in a news context is the shifting of pixels:

Whether done by an editor, graphic designer or the photographer, moving pixels is an inexcusable decision. Altering the composition by compression, cloning or removing something from the photograph, (other than dust spots), creates a new image based on an idealistic notion (Bartletti).

It is this transition from a visually appealing image that reflects fact to one that reflects an ideal which marks the transition from artistic photojournalism to simply art, or rather "photographic illustration". These boundaries are nuanced, though. Especially within the context of a newspaper, such manipulations are certainly not viewed as art but in a more disparaging light. Don Bartletti comments on the controversy surrounding a photograph that was published on the front page of the LA Times in April 2003 which was later revealed as a photo-montage of two separate images:



Walski, Brian. LA Times. April 2003.

I met him [the photographer] in Kuwait City after he was ordered by the Times to return to L.A. as soon as possible. In a hotel room, Brian admitted to me that he was getting 'really good stuff' every day of the war for the past 2 weeks and strove to make that day's photo even better...The temptation to manipulate an already strong, story-telling image to satisfy his visual idealism was wrong...After a few days, Brian was given an opportunity to admit what he did and he was fired (Bartletti).

If Walski's image was considered outrageous at the L.A. Times for ethical reasons, it could arguably be considered a work of art in a different setting, for instance, if it were displayed as part of an artistic exhibit or photographic collection on his perception of the conflict in Iraq. This is a typical example in which digital alteration causes a

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photograph to slide across the boundary of photojournalism into either a ‘visual lie’ or ‘art’ depending on the context in which it is viewed.

A Comparison of Photojournalism to the work of prominent War Artists:

Throughout History, artists have painted scenes of war as a means of recording important events. Thus, in essence, the roles of photojournalists and war artists in society are very similar. Both record history with a personal slant. The photojournalists of today are war artists with digital cameras. We consider Francisco Goya and Henry Moore artists; so why not Don Bartletti?

There are some differences between the two fields, though. Firstly, painting and drawing may not be as factually accurate as photojournalism. Furthermore, these media inevitably allow for greater creative input than photography. A painter can change proportions, colors, and even the dynamics of situations to a much greater extent than a photographer to reflect personal bias.

Francisco Goya

Goya, who lived through Napoleon's invasion of Spain, attained the position of court painter under both Spanish and French kings. He produced this painting, "The 3rd of May 1808", while working for Ferdinand VII. It is a visual representation of the tragic events which he witnessed as a consequence of the war. His bias and sympathy for the Spanish men being executed is evident. The scene is dark, the sky - literally black – showing the despair and hopelessness of the victims of the execution. The anguish on the faces of those being executed is poignant giving them a humanity which the French soldiers, who are portrayed as mechanical in their perfect synchronization, lack (Goya 831).



Goya, Francisco. Third of May, 1808. 1808. Museo del Prado, Madrid.

Bartletti discusses the connection between Goya's art and his work:

When the old master muralists worked under commission they were beholden to their 'employers'. It's not quite the same in photojournalism for the LA Times as I have infinite freedom to find, capture and transmit the news. However there were occasions where my photographs were not published, revealing an editorial prejudice that shocks me to this day. It involved the first day of high school student walkouts and marches about 6 or 7 years ago...as the debate over immigration reform ramped up. I shot pictures...of student hurling rocks,

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ripping up the American flag, and physical confrontations with police. None of those photos were published (Bartletti)...*

*see Appendix

Thus, despite the fact that photojournalists do not have to portray an event to match their employer's views, this kind of editorial bias, ultimately, results in the same outcome. Readers were most likely left with a sugar coated mental image of the walkouts caused by the editorial filtering of images. Though artists do have more liberty in crafting an image from scratch out of their memory and imagination, a photographer's conscious selection of the elements to focus on is just as crucial in forming our opinion of an event.

Bartletti's photographs are capable of expressing the mood of a scene just as explicitly as Goya's paintings. The stylistic aspects of his work – the use of perspective, blur, and silhouettes – all contribute to turning the photographs into symbols of the hardships of immigration, just as the color scheme and facial expressions in Goya's painting make "The 3rd of May 1808" a symbol of the tragedy of the French invasion. The only difference is that, while artists can create these stylistic aspects at any time to convey the desired message, photographers must search and wait for the right instant to capture them.

Henry Moore –

Throughout World War II, Moore produced a series of these shelter drawings. He was inspired by seeing people seeking shelter in the London Underground during the German air raids of September 1940. He would observe and make brief sketches by night then produce larger drawings in his studio. The series came to symbolize the courage of the Londoners as their city was attacked. Again, the link between these drawings and photojournalism is evident. The drawings are emotively charged, due to their darkness and absence of color which evokes the squalor of the situation. They were also informative and helped communicate the gravity of the situation to other nations just as photojournalism would have today. In fact, the collection became part of a propaganda campaign to encourage the US to come to Britain's aid in the war ("Making History, Art and Documentary"). Bartletti's collection of photographs has similarly served to raise international awareness on the topic of the human toll of immigration



Moore, Henry. Grey Tube Shelter. 1940.

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In conclusion, Don Bartletti's collection of photographs, "Bound to El Norte" is a work of fine art because each image demonstrates Bartletti's intent, mastery of his medium and personal involvement. The photographs also harmoniously merge form and content, convey human emotion, and exhibit artistic vision. Finally, the collection as a whole is a work of art because of its ability to tell a coherent story. Still, I recognize that not *all* photojournalism is art. There are many uninspiring images in our daily newspapers to which we pay little attention. In this respect, Don Bartletti is a pioneer in his field. While Photojournalism is not always an art, he is indeed an artist and his unique approach to the subject of immigration arguably makes him a contemporary Francisco Goya. One wonders whether the beauty of his images makes them more effective photojournalism. As Merry Foresta, director of the Smithsonian Photography Initiative, eloquently put it "A picture made to collect information is often made as a beautiful picture, because that's the best way to collect it" (Gopnik E, E10). Thus, as Walker Evans' images of the Great Depression and Nick Ut's image of the Vietnam War, Bartletti's photographs on immigration have transcended photojournalism to become iconic works of art.

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Appendices

Interview #1 – Don Bartletti

What do you think the importance of photography is in the news?

The most memorable photographs confirm what reporting suggests. Courageous men and woman who bear witness with the camera create photographs that often define our memory of an event. They must get it right and not miss the decisive moments that help preserve history.

How do you think images affect a reader's perception of an event?

I think most people trust a picture from a news event or a documentary feature to be honest and truthful.

In a previous interview on this subject, you explained that: "the benchmark for digital photojournalists is to treat the raw image, which in the early days was the negative, on your computer screen, with no more adjustment than you could do in the darkroom. You can correct the color. You can maybe brighten up the dark points, lighten up the shadows, crop it, and that's it." To what extent do you use this kind of alteration in your own work?

Almost every image I prepare for publication or the Internet has been given all the corrections mentioned.

How do you feel altering colors, brightness, and cropping affects your photographs and how readers will perceive them? In other words, *why* do you alter the images? I know you mentioned that certain alterations are necessary to compensate for the lapse between "the way your brain perceives light and dark in a real scene and the ability of a photographic device to record it". Could you elaborate on this and, also, do you alter your images for any other reason?

The 20th Century master fine art photographer and musician, Ansel Adams is coined photographic truism: the film negative is the "score" and the print from that negative is the "performance". In the old darkroom days, one-at-a-time, hand-made prints were dodged and burned, bleached and toned. No two prints could look exactly the same. Today, digital cameras create a file – the equivalent of a negative. The file can be printed on a desktop printer, sent to a newspaper printing plate, or output to a web page. Using Adams' metaphor, the "performance" depends on the variables of desktop printer's ink and paper, the skill of the newspaper pressman, or the quality of your computer screen. I'm not a fan of over saturated colors, over contrast manipulation, darkening corners, or of converting color files to black and white.

Digital cameras sometimes don't record high contrast scenes to my satisfaction. When that's

the case I use adjustment tools in Photoshop to restore detail to the highlights and shadows. If the information is there in the original raw file, it can be made visible. I also check for unnatural color. For example a person with light skin who is photographed in the low light of sunset, can appear flushed or red. A blond photographed under florescent lights can have bluish-green hair. Someone photographed under a green leafy tree will look a little green too. It would be unfair to the subject, confusing for the viewer, and unprofessional for me not to filter out those false tones. Before I file a photo, these are some of the corrections, not alterations, that are prudent.

As a photojournalist, you have a lot of power when it comes to giving a news story a certain slant. Do you consciously take photographs a certain way or use specific settings to convey a message?

My most successful photo essays reveal something about a person or place. The process feels somewhere between cultural anthropology, and a scavenger hunt. Amid the ebb and flow of a news event or the stoic pace of a social feature, there's always a decisive moment that contributes to the overall theme. It usually takes a lot of time and energy. But I begin focusing long before I pick up the camera by talking with reporters, editors and reading about the subject. In a foreign country I hire a "Fixer" to guide me. Planning, experience, the gift of time, and the help of others are essential. I select camera lenses and perspectives very deliberately. I'm not a security camera watching things pass by so I move around a lot, working my way closer to become familiar and non-threatening to the people whose story I want to photograph. In a newspaper or the web, where the photos usually appear pretty small, the subject and composition must be compelling enough to arrest the viewer's attention. I choose a telephoto lens to isolate something from the background or bring a distant subject in close

I use a wide-angle lens most often as it allows me compose in layers with a foreground, middle and background. The main subject becomes obvious and there's supporting information visible in the distance and the edges of the frame. When I want to drive home the horror of the Mexican drug war, I'm relentless in the search for the carnage of a shootout scene and the reaction of citizens living with such insanity. For my continuing documentary project about migration I put myself among illegal immigrants. From that perspective I see some of what drives them to flee a failed homeland and struggle for something better. In the U.S., I observe the how migration changes the status quo, disrupts nativists, and is a salvation for many immigrants.

Many who oppose the editing of news photographs argue that editing a photograph basically results in a "visual lie" which can be compared to writing something untrue in a news story, whether it be a simple color alteration or the more deceiving shifting of pixels. How do you respond to this?

In photojournalism, shifting pixels is a visual lie. Whether done by an editor, graphic designer

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or the photographer, moving pixels is an inexcusable decision. Altering the composition by compression, cloning or removing something from the photograph, (other than dust spots), creates a new image based usually based on an idealistic notion. Altered images changed to fit a certain proportion, or dramatize a subject or over saturated to jump off the rack are a threat to photojournalists who use only the camera, and a code of ethics to create the final composition. I don't consider correcting for contrast, color balance or cropping to be a "visual lie".

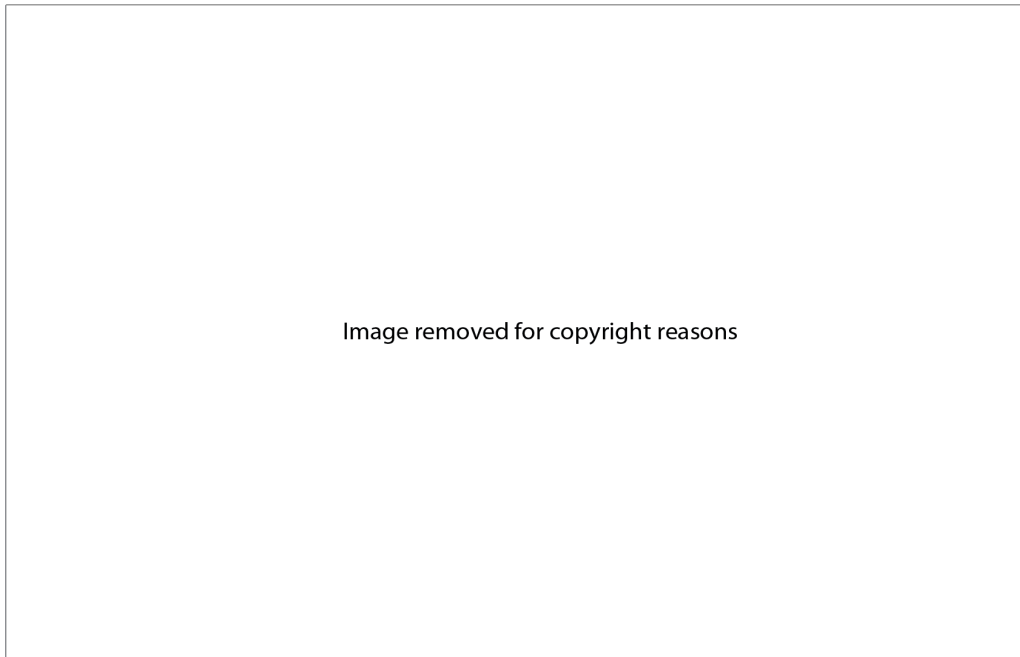
Every photograph that is taken is the photographer's interpretation of an event since he/she makes decisions about angle, shutter speed, angle, etc before taking the shot. In your opinion, is there such thing as an unbiased photograph?

On occasion, spot news photographs such as airplanes crashing into the World Trade Center as seen from across the river, are not biased. Location, equipment and timing were as elemental to creating the image as sex is to life. However, as 911 unfolded, photographer's bias, and a degree of luck, became paramount to recording the tragedy. Photographers who advanced in the face of the evacuation found fleeing businessmen and women covered in dust, firemen doubled over and the raising the flag amid the rubble: a record of destruction and national insult. On doorsteps throughout America people stared at their newspapers and wept. Through the tears emerged national unity. 8 time zones away, in Pakistan I witnessed the same photographs glued to sticks and held high by mobs waving proof of their victory.

News Magazines (i.e. Time and Newsweek) are a grey area when it comes to ethics in photojournalism. They very often manipulate images, especially on their covers, which they consider a marketing tool to attract readers. Sometimes the alteration is obvious but more often than not, the changes are difficult to detect. What are your views on these "digital illustrations"? (Here is a very recent example which was published on the cover of Time Magazine: Iran vs Iran which was published on June 29th - <http://www.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,20090629,00.html>. The image is actually a composite of a few photographs.)

I'm disgusted by the graphic manipulation of feature and news photographs in the National Geographic, the Day in the Life book series, Time and Newsweek. Clever changes in composition and shading are sophomoric buffoonery. An editors attempt to disclaim any trickery with the tiny agate credit line that reads "photo illustration" is ridiculous. It's easily overlooked and often misunderstood. For decades readers of these publications have learned to trust their pictures as genuine. Slipping in a doctored image is a breach of faith.

Here is the photograph I mentioned in my previous e-mail:



Walski, Brian. LA Times. April 2003.

The top image was composed out of the bottom two, improving composition but also creating a more dramatic interaction between the British soldier and the Iraqi civilians. The photograph appeared on the front page of the LA times in April 2003 shortly after the US invasion of Iraq. How did this incident affect the newspaper?

It exposed the wonder and temptation of technology and both shocked all of us at the Times. We hoped Brian had simply buckled under the pressure of 2 weeks in the war zone. I met him at in Kuwait City after he was ordered by the Times to return to L.A. as soon as possible. In a hotel room, Brian admitted to me that he was getting “really good stuff” every day of the war for the past 2 weeks and strove to make that day’s photo even better. Brian had a reputation for being in the right place at the right time and making amazing images. Getting to Basra, Iraq was a tribute to his tenacity and courage. The temptation to manipulate an already strong, story-telling image to satisfy his visual idealism was wrong. It cast a shadow of doubt on all the images he had ever made for us over the past several years. Our director of photography ordered his entire archive purged from the L.A.Times database. After a few days, Brian was given an opportunity to admit what he did and he was fired.

How do you establish a relationship with your subjects? How do you earn their trust and respect so that you are able to photograph their lives so closely.

I reveal that I work for a big American newspaper and I think what you are doing is important

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for my readers to understand. In a way, you are part of the history of your country, or your town or your family. It would be a shame for something so important to be overlooked. I have the talent, resources of my paper and the promise to show the truth. With your permission, it would be a privilege to stay near and observe.

Finally, on a slightly unrelated note, if you had known you wanted to become a photojournalist, looking back, what would you have studied in college?

I would have studied cultural anthropology, history, sociology, political science, medicine, geology, parenting, criminal justice, meteorology, engineering, music, psychology, business, military tactics, computer technology, chemistry and logic. Instead, I majored in Art. Gratefully, my career in photojournalism has given me a front row seat to the wonders of life and all the stuff I never studied in school. It's a privilege to have earned this position with a great American newspaper. My life has been enriched beyond words.

DON BARTLETTI

Photojournalist

Los Angeles Times

September 3, 2009

Interview # 2 – Don Bartletti

After a discussion with my sponsor, I have elaborated and given my essay a more defined focus. It continues to be rooted in photo-alteration which I use as a starting point to discuss whether photojournalism overlaps with art.

This emerged from a discussion on Goya - He was considered an artist and in essence, his role (as a painter who recorded war scenes) can be compared to your role as a photo-journalist. I was wondering what your thoughts were on whether photojournalism can be considered art in a broader sense as well as specifically relating to your own body of work.

To follow up from your previous answers -

In response to my last question, you said you were an art major. How does this background influence your work? Do you consider your work to be art? Why or why not? Are there certain images within your work that you consider to be art and others which you do not? For instance, do you view "Bound to El Norte" as a work of art?

...When the old master muralists worked under commission they were beholden to their "employers". It's not quite the same in photojournalism for the LA Times as I have infinite freedom to find, capture and transmit the news.

However there were occasions where my photographs were not published, revealing an editorial prejudice that shocks me to this day. It involved the first day of high school student walkouts and marches about 6 or 7 years ago, through the streets of S. Cal as the debate over immigration reform ramped up. I shot pictures in Santa Ana, CA, just south of Los Angeles, of student hurling rocks, ripping up the American flag, and physical confrontations with police. None of those photos were published despite repeated transmissions to my photo editors; they were immediately deleted from the system. Our front page photo from another photographer showed smiling students riding on a car hood. Several other photos were used as well, all a very soft, non-controversial representation of the walkouts. I didn't set out to find the ugly side of day's events; however editors did shape the appearance of a harmonious day of youthful energy for a good cause. I saw it differently.

Now, back to your question about news photos as art. I believe there are 2 things that make a great photograph: Content and Style.

"Bound to El Norte", the child riding alone atop the train, has both. The content is the dirty little boy in such a sitting in atop a speeding freight train is worthy of notice and publicity. The style, that is my composition is absolutely important as it is simple, and arrests the attention of even a casual newspaper reader. The photograph is a metaphor about children traveling north to the U.S. The foggy horizon is indistinct like the boy's uncertainty about just where his destination is. He's staring forward, to the north, with his back to those people and circumstances that failed him. The image is slightly painterly, no saturated colors, slightly

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blurred on the edges to indicate motion. This image satisfies my endless struggle with photojournalism: to make images of lasting editorial importance that are at once beautiful and revealing. The words of Dorothea Lange, the great documentary photojournalist of the Dust Bowl Era help set my pace perfectly. She said, and I paraphrase, I don't want people to look at my photos and ask how I did it or how hard I worked. I only want them to gaze at the image and ask, How can such things be?

I think the Pulitzer web site of my work has another image that is so very dear to me. It's a blurry photo of a hand holding an orange and another reaching out to take it. I call it "Gift for a Northbound Migrant". A teenager standing by the tracks in Veracruz was giving fruit to the stowaways on the freight train it sped by. This image is why I do photojournalism. The gift, the orange, is crystal clear. The two other hand touching communicate, Thank you, and Go Safely. The content and style are all there.

Don Bartletti

Photojournalist

Los Angeles Times

September 21, 2009