

# Pierre: Powerful photos capture the decisive moments in life

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So I don't know why exactly I went to Vietnam. It was the place to be for photojournalists at the time. But on top of that there was this kind of idea that it was important to report and to participate a little tiny bit in stopping the process. Which is a big utopia. I think that opportunity didn't stop anything, but at the time I was young and thinking it was important to report. Like many young journalists in the '60s or in the '70s we were all thinking it was our mission to report and stop. It was a big stupid thing, but you do not have the experience when you are 20. So I was drawn in the beginning like that. It just happened like that.

It was not really something I wanted to do. Like any path, you don't know why you follow it.

**Q: What to you makes a powerful photo?**

**A:** Usually it's because you capture the right moment. Those kind of little magical moments in action where everything goes together correctly. The way it's framed, the way all the people are, their place in the image and their expressions.

That's what Henri Cartier-Bresson called 'the decisive moment,' which is an expression which is very true and still valid today. There are the decisive moments in life. One of the magics of photography is that it's the only medium that allows you to capture such a moment that only lasts for 1/250th of a second. It's really so short. And that's it.

At least in the kind of photography that I am talking about, which is photojournalism or street photography. I'm not talking about still life photography or landscape but the right moment is important there. So I think that's what makes photography stand alone. And it's very, very rare. It happens four-to-five times in one year — a real photograph where everything comes together, that's approximately it. It's not much. And you put all the photography together, because they are all taken at about 1/125th of a second. At the end of your life when you look at your good photos, it can only be two seconds or three seconds so it's a very, very short time.

French photographer Robert Doisneau published a book called ("Three Seconds of Eternity") and that's what it took to take all the good pictures in his life. So that gives an idea of how short those moments are. And you cannot miss it."

**Q: Do you think digital photography is hurting or helping photography?**

**A:** That is a more complicated subject than it seems. I think there is both good and bad. The good is that now the quality that has been reached in digital photography.

I have seen all the progress of this new way in my lifetime and now we have reached a point where it is very interesting in the quality. There are more cameras that are now fantastic and deliver files that are as good as what you would get with a traditional film. And in a digital darkroom there is the ability to make prints that are very good. So I think that is interesting. Also for professionals, the opportunity to go faster and deliver the photos faster than if you are working with film. It's obvious that that is a big advantage in the world we are living in.

Now, in my opinion, the big disadvantage is, because of the quality of the cameras that can do everything alone, the quality of the photography is going down a lot. Because most of the young photographers I see don't have a clue. They let the camera do everything. And most of them don't know what to do, how to do it, how it works.

So there is this new generation of photographer that shoots like crazy and sometimes I see some young photographer and they say, 'Oh, I shot 500 photos in a day and after I try and find a good one.' And that's not the way to work. It's better to make one shot the good one. I think this is a pity that a lot of photographers have forgotten that, even if the tool is fantastic, that the human being needs to have the knowledge and needs to know what to do.

In everything in life, as soon as you use a tool, even if it's a fantastic tool, you need to know how to use it. You can take the best brushes and the best colors and the best canvas but this will not make you a painter. I think that's a pity in a way because a lot of those photographers are not able to take advantage of the fantastic cameras there are now because the camera is so fantastic that they think that they don't have to do anything themselves.

I think it's a great pity for photography in general. I know that my point of view is shared by my generation of photographer but we all think that it's a little bit of a pity for photography what has happened now.

**Q: I noticed this when I went to your exhibit and you went to showing some of the war images and then Tibet, India and**



Rome, Italy.

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**Pierre Toutain-Dorbec**  
French photographer

Nepal, and then you switched to landscapes. Why did you make the switch?

**A:** There is a little bit of humans, but far less. But that is photography in the USA. There is not the same contact with human beings here as there is anywhere else in the world. As a photographer, if you arrive in a tiny village in India everyone will come to see you, and touch you, and they smile, and they ask where you are from. And they will talk and invite you for the tea and you cannot refuse because it's part of the welcome.

In the USA, it is the opposite. If you are arriving in a small village most of the time people will look at you weird. (They will ask), 'What are you doing here?' And that's what I heard many times in the USA. 'Why are you taking a picture?' And so I say, 'I'm sorry, did I disturb you, I'm on the road?' And they say, 'Yes, but what are you doing here?' And not nicely.

So you don't have the same contact, so of course you don't have the same situation, and you don't take the same kind of photos. That's the main reason why. I did not travel everywhere in the USA, but I'd go on big road trips for the past 10 years and for me, it's a big problem because I'm not used to that. And there is some areas where it's better like in the coast here it's kind of OK. But in Eastern Oregon, in places like Prairie City, people come up to me and are like, 'Why are you taking pictures here?' 'Who are you?' So it's very difficult for a photographer if human beings are your main subject.

For this reason, if you noticed some of the major photography that has been done in America by some of the major photographers like Irving Penn or Richard Avedon you will notice that it's studio work. You have to go through the process of bringing (the subject) in, explaining what you are doing. And this kind of photography doesn't really exist when you go to shoot in other countries because you have a proximity with the human being which isn't the same.

So that's the reason for the landscapes, I'm photographing with what I have at my disposal. If someone won't let you in their home and there is barbed wire and a sign that says, 'no trespassing,' it's better not to. You cannot pass and say, 'I'm a photographer.' So I have less human beings, unfortunately, and a little more landscape. And I like the landscape around here. But I regret not being able to photograph human beings here like I always do.



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