

Recollections Preface

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Preface to Philip Jones Griffiths, *Recollections*, Trolley, London 2008, n.p.



Rhondda Valley © Philip Jones Griffiths/Magnum Photos

Though their style and emotional characteristics produce an unusual, striking and highly recognisable combination, it can be difficult to get a fix on the distinctive elements of Philip Jones Griffiths' photographs.

First, there is a sharply attuned sensitivity to glances, gestures and expressions. This is common enough among documentary photographers, indeed it is the major part of their metier, but in Griffiths' work it reaches an extraordinary pitch. The pictures of Welsh children that begin this book illustrate it well; it is there in the photograph of boys of the Rhondda Valley in the contrast of clowning faces versus one that is diffident, in their touching draping of arms about shoulders and the slight stiffness of their poses. Or in the lone girl in Merthyr Tydfil, where there is a congruence of desolate expression, the protective cradling of head in hands, and her placement in the trash-strewn scrub that surrounds her. In some of these early pictures, Griffiths' subjects are aware of his presence but the encounter

must have been a very rapid one, for they have not had time to compose themselves as people tend to do for cameras but are caught in an intermediate moment, looking into the lens but still carrying with them the expression and pose of their previous activity. This can be seen clearly in the extraordinary gaze of the Laugharne girl wearing a bow, as she fixes the photographer (and we viewers) with intense curiosity.



Children, Laugharne, Wales (1952) © Philip Jones Griffiths/Magnum Photos

This sensitivity is coupled with a very fine sense of photographic composition. The photographs in this book have a strong graphic sense, as the young photographer plays with the possibilities yielded first by the square format of 120 roll film, and then the rectangle of uncropped 35mm film. This sense of composition is tied to social meaning; the spaces around a figure and between figures are signs of alienation or solidarity, while power relations are also written into the spatial organisation of Welsh mining valley towns. In a wide-angle image taken in Dowlais of a man and his dogs, lines emerging from a telegraph pole point towards the man's head and the group of dogs, the man's body is turned outwards and his head inwards, staring into a space that we cannot see, but that we assume to be as barren as the ground on which he squats. The line of houses, the shadows of man and beasts, the clouds above his head, and the tiny figures in the background are all sweetly placed, as if the image had been lovingly cut apart and readjusted in Photoshop to a compositional standard that approaches Poussin, rather than being the product of a photographer, with a simple mechanical camera and a fixed 28mm lens, deciding where to put himself and when to release the shutter.

Yet, while Griffiths certainly carries both these sensitivities to a very high standard, they alone cannot account for the distinctiveness of his work. After all, they are both features which are common among documentary photographers, and particularly those of the Magnum stable, of which Jones Griffiths was a part since 1966. They are, of course, found in full measure among Magnum's founders.

In addition, then, there is in Griffiths' work an unflinching, prolonged look at suffering and at its human consequences for those who endure it, those who try to ameliorate it, and those who merely view it. That concern runs through the work like the single strand of red rogue yarn found in every length of the Navy's hemp rope. It is most evident in Griffiths' Vietnam pictures; and of these there are images that must haunt many of those who have the fortitude to really look at them—whether it is the expression on the face of a captured NLF activist awaiting in a helicopter her fate of torture and death; or the faces of a group of children gathering around the bloody corpse of another child lying in the street; or the entire section on bombing in *Vietnam Inc.*, and much of *Agent Orange*. The latter book, the product of thirty years' engagement with its dreadful subject, the dioxin poisoning of a nation and the genetic deformations it produces down the generations, makes the harshest demands on its readers (the demands on the photographer can barely be imagined).¹ *Việt Nam at Peace* systematically explores the consequences of the war and of the marketisation of the economy, and both these later books are careful to show not just the appalling depredations of that nation but also the efforts taken to improve things.² Griffith's hardest images should not be confused with the ambulance-chasing that is one of the disreputable features of photojournalism. In his work there is a concerted effort, both within the frame of each picture and across them, as picture sequences are assembled with text, to arrive at an understanding of what produced this death or this maiming. That is what makes the work so inexorable and demanding of the viewer: it contains no 'accidents of war'.



© Philip Jones Griffiths/Magnum Photos

¹ Philip Jones Griffiths, *Agent Orange: 'Collateral Damage' in Viet Nam*, Trolley Ltd, London 2003.

² Philip Jones Griffiths, *Việt Nam at Peace*, Trolley Ltd, London 2005.

While the circumstances of *Recollections* are gentler (even in Northern Ireland), there is nevertheless a steady and intelligent gaze directed at the solidarities and conflicts of working-class life, the consequences of profiteering on the urban landscape, and particularly in the implied fate of children abandoned to the joys and dangers of play amid old bomb sites and other ruins. The red strand is there in ‘Miner with “black lung” Rhondda Valley’, in the miner’s face and eyes, of course, and in the blurry figure of the woman who reaches out an arm to tend him, and in the way the mirror sketches out a space in front of the miner’s face, a space that takes in the photographer and other viewers of the scene. The mirror, as so often in photography, also suggests the photographic process itself, and along with it the political, social and even ethical implication of viewers of the photograph in the scene depicted. That stand is a subterranean murmur that can be heard in all Griffiths’ photographs of suffering.



Miner with “Black Lung”, Rhondda Valley © Philip Jones Griffiths/Magnum Photos

Coupled with that urge to understand pain, Griffiths’ work also displays a very well developed sense of humour. Some of the work in this book is lightly humorous, spun on photographic alignments and contrasts such as the similarities between a sculpture and its viewer. Other pictures, which may seem merely absurd, bear on deeper issues: the ice-cream van that blocks and defaces a fine valley landscape comments on an aesthetic and environmental disregard which has surrendered the urban and rural landscape of this island to motorised pursuits and strewn it with rubbish. Humour can also be found in pictures of Northern Ireland in which ordinary domestic activities continue alongside soldiers taking cover behind garden shrubs. It is there, too, in the brave and absurd gesture of treading on a gun barrel (as the British officer who saw Griffiths capture that moment and insisted he open the back of his camera, no doubt realised). It pervades the fine social comedy that is pursued through streets, clubs, pubs and bingo halls.

But humour also has its more serious side, in the portrayal of the major and minor hypocrisies of politicians, and the way in which they choose to display themselves for a public. The dark and beautifully composed picture of Edward Heath speaking gets this combination well; the contrast between the idealised poster rendition of the Prime Minister and the reduced figure at the podium is humorous, as is the relation between the poster image and the jowly, anxious-looking Tory who sits beside it. These figures are sinister as well as ridiculous, rendered in sepulchral tones and shot from below to indicate their shady power. Remember, too, that this was also the period when such political humour came to the fore in Britain, undermining the conventions of deference to the establishment that had been reinforced across two world wars. It was the time of *Private Eye*, of the scabrous cartoons of Ralph Steadman and Gerald Scarfe, of satirical revues, including *Beyond the Fringe* and the BBC's *That Was the Week That Was*, which dared to satirise the until then untouchable Macmillan.³ Just as *Private Eye* captured the verbal conventions of politics, with its evasions and shades of pomposity, Griffiths' work exposed its visual rhetoric.

Griffiths' humour leavens even the darkest work with a sardonic grin. Talking of how he tried to make sense of the murderous chaos of Vietnam, he said

...when I would see a group of refugees being forced at gunpoint from their homes and the officer would turn to me and say, 'Oh, it's great to see these people voting with their feet,' I would start laughing. Marched off to camps surrounded by barbed wire and with a big sign over the gates saying 'Welcome to Freedom' was, apart from anything else, amazingly funny ...⁴

Or John Pilger remembering meeting Griffiths in Vietnam, where the photographer handed him to view 'not a bundle of rolls of film, not copious sheets of contact prints' but 'a used brown envelope containing six photographs', and watched his astonished reaction to those prints 'straight faced, eyes twinkling'.⁵ The point was that those six prints were, which included his famous picture of the deft pick-pocketing of a GI, were enough to encapsulate the vicious and absurd conditions of that war.

This humour does not displace the focus on suffering but is an integral part of it. Griffiths was as aware as anyone of the unconceivable dislocation of peasants forced from the land that they had tended and in which their ancestors were buried, and documented it eloquently. The self-righteous homilies of the invaders are contained within the same frame. So humour and the depiction of suffering are inextricably bound up together—in a dialectic that bears on the operation of power, revealing its degrading consequences along with the absurd consequences of its accompanying ideology.

³ See Humphrey Carpenter, *That Was Satire That Was: The Satire Boom of the 1960s*, Phoenix, London 2002.

⁴ From an interview with the author, November 2006. Much of the material in this essay is drawn from a series of interviews with the photographer between autumn 2006 and spring 2008.

⁵ Griffiths, *Việt Nam at Peace*, n.p.



Captured suspects © Philip Jones Griffiths/Magnum Photos

If that combination has remained little examined in writing about Griffiths' work, it is because his reputation was built primarily on the work he made in Vietnam, above all with *Vietnam Inc.*, published in 1971, and in his recent books, *Agent Orange* and *Viet Nam at Peace*. *Vietnam Inc.*, the most remarkable photographic book about the war, established Griffiths' unusual way of working: the building of complex picture sequences, accompanied by much text in captions, section introductions and longer essays. It is a version of the illustrated magazine layout but here turned to dark and terrible subject matter: the ultimate abuse of power in attempting to annihilate a people. In these books is laid out the spectacle of the US military machine, and its mechanical trampling over a swathe of South East Asia, directly causing millions of deaths, and setting in train consequences that would claim the lives of millions more. Griffiths' commitment to Vietnam, his numerous returns there in the thirty-plus years since the war ended, have tied any view of his work to the particulars of that conflict, one of the most vicious and genocidal of the miserable tally of colonial wars in which the US (and the UK) have participated.

This book, *Recollections*, is quite different. The photographs, of the mid 1950s to the mid 1960s, were taken at a time when Britain was undergoing a multitude of rapid transformations: its economy boomed, and a universal consumer society began to emerge; buoyant employment levels handed many in the working class power and at least a modicum of wealth; property speculators and urban planners swiftly altered the old fabric of the nation's cities; and in those cities, bohemian cultural scenes sprung up, populated by left-leaning poets, artists and musicians who led the erosion of the stiff formal codes of behaviour and deportment that had governed the middle class.

Equally, from our perspective, the media landscape of that time is barely recognisable, and the power of the newspapers and above all of the illustrated magazines is now a little hard to reimagine. Griffiths recounts having a single image published in *Life* and receiving a cheque that amounted to over a year's wages as a pharmacist. Even the newspapers paid enough to make it worthwhile for a photographer to wander the streets searching for those particular combinations of people, places and actions that would be publishable: those that in some way told a story, or could be used to tell one. Nevertheless, in that decade from the mid 1950s to the mid 1960s, television rapidly widened its audience and began to dominate news coverage, an intimation of what was to come for photojournalism.

The print media of that time used photographs in the present but was careless about their future. In the days of analogue photography, when copying pictures was time-consuming and expensive, photographers often handed their negatives over to the papers and magazines for publication. Griffiths reclaimed some of the negatives used in this book from their threatened disposal as rubbish by a picture agency that had gone out of business. Others have been lost, perhaps forever. So *Recollections* is a partial account of a domestic photojournalistic career.



Richmond Jazz Festival © Philip Jones Griffiths/Magnum Photos

Photojournalism thrived in the reviving postwar economy, as magazines and newspapers used pictures stories as a hook to bring readers and viewers to advertising. Griffiths worked for major newspapers including the *Guardian*, the *Observer* and the *Sunday Times*, as well as for new consumer and culture magazines such as *Man About Town* (co-run, before he entered

Parliament, by Michael Heseltine). Many of the pictures in *Recollections* may be read in that light: as close social observations of British life, often whimsical and humorous, focused on the telling gesture or expression that indicates something of the changes the nation faced. It is there of course in the pictures of pop concerts and ‘happenings’; and in the faces of previously sheltered viewers confronting with consternation (what now seem to us very mild) examples of modernist sculpture in public parks. It is there, too, in scenes of lovers embracing on the ground at a jazz festival, regarded sternly by their elders. Some of these pictures may remind us of Bill Brandt’s 1930s vision of English cultural mores and class difference, but while Brandt, an outsider, saw them as immutable forms, Griffiths often trains his lens on the changeable and the deceptive. The meeting of an infantry sergeant with a Beefeater, for example, is no celebration of fixed English stereotypes, since the Beefeater is a man in costume whose job it is to draw people into an eatery and bar. Often the signs of secure English identity seem hollowed out and waxy, like the mannequins of the Queen and Prince Philip seen in a Blackpool tableaux.

Also, in being a book about (and perhaps largely for) the British, *Recollections* does not need to explain at length its political and social setting, since everyone here lives with the legacies of the phenomena that Griffiths portrays: the out-of-town hypermarket is a grandchild of the first supermarkets through which bewildered shoppers picked their way in the 1950s; the social and physical consequences of the postwar building boom and the hasty demolition of old neighbourhoods still surround us; relations between races and religions is as contested an issue as it was when the postwar labour shortage was met with mass immigration; and class difference is as wide and culturally marked as ever. In such circumstances, captions can be kept brief and the sequence of images can do the main work of conveying meaning.

Yet, at the same time, there are elements to these images that appear extraordinarily remote. Many incidental features, of dress for example, naturally catch the eye. The very physiognomy of some of these figures appears strange (for instance, of the schoolmaster with his children), and remind us of the profound changes in diet, physical activity, medical care and above all screen-time that separate us from previous generations. Above all, it is the depiction of a manner of working-class life, which had its elements of confidence and optimism along with the hardships, which (from the other side of the Thatcher watershed) seems hardest to recapture. The wanton destruction of industries and unions brought with it the unheeding desolation of numerous lives, the erosion of many collective habits and solidarities, and of course, (its main intention) the end of working-class politics.

Contributing to the apparent antiquity of these images is Griffiths’ commitment to black and white photography. Some of these photographs were originally shot in colour, and in his magazine work, Griffiths would sometimes publish in colour, as commercial imperatives demanded. It can be a shock to see some of his best-known work appearing in colour, for example in a *Sunday Telegraph* story about Vietnam. In all his books, though, black and white reigns, and Griffiths has been forthright in his views about the distractions and degradations that colour can bring to the documentary image. He concluded one article on the subject, ‘The Curse of Colour’:

As I sit writing this in my hotel room in Phnom Penh, the vagaries of the Cambodian electrical system cause the TV to keep jumping between colour and black and white every few minutes. I recall an old observation -- the same

scene, glitzy in colour, attains a profundity when the set switches to black and white. A resonance occurs that triggers a strange emotional identification within the labyrinths of the mind. An empathy that has its roots deep in the brain's visual cortex -- a mechanism that awards an importance to memory in monochrome. The same mechanism, I believe, that causes us to dream in black and white.⁶

It is black and white, the same stark and dramatic tones that W. Eugene Smith used to record the steelworkers of Pittsburgh, or more recently that Sebastião Salgado used in his prolonged elegy to workers, that Griffiths employs here, and it thrusts those images into a photographic tradition, and also into a time that seems definitively remote, though it is only that of our parents or grandparents. That antiquity is, in one sense, no illusion. A way of life has passed, a way of photographing has passed with the degradation of the street environment by traffic, a way of publishing has passed, and a technology has almost vanished (who uses black and white film anymore?). We are left with these shades, these recollections to conjure with in the present.

The hopeful elements of the 1950s and 1960s pictures, of social mobility, of an emerging cultural bohemia, of a relaxation of sexual mores, even of a commercial brightening of the dour circumstances of postwar Britain (though Griffiths always reserved a critical angle on that), eventually crashed against the genocide in Vietnam: on the realisation that those 'freedoms' at home were founded upon the domination, torture and killing of people abroad, and that (as Thomas Friedman put it, with unintended candour) you can't have McDonalds without McDonnell Douglas (makers of the F4 Phantom of the Vietnam era, and the modern Apache attack helicopter).⁷



Ban the Bomb enactment showing casualties, Embankment, London, 1962
© Philip Jones Griffiths/Magnum Photos

⁶ Philip Jones Griffiths, 'The Curse of Colour', 2002.

⁷ Thomas Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, Harper Collins, London 2000.

This was and is literally true for a nation which, though it stayed out of Vietnam, sacrificed the economic good of its working people for numerous foreign ‘adventures’ to defend its Empire, increase its international influence, or merely maintain its role as useful adjunct to the globally dominant power. Nuclear weapons were at the core of this national fate, for so much followed from the decision to make and hold onto them, and have the means to defend them, from the close political alignment with the United States to the vast and pervasive mechanisms of policing put in place to monitor and control the mass movements that built against them. There is a way in which Griffiths’ photographs of CND demonstrations that end *Recollections* may be read as another collection of heritage imagery, summoning up figures such as Bertrand Russell and E.P. Thompson who, it seems, are now little read and thought about. Another reading, though, would match these images to those of the extraordinary mass demonstrations that preceded the Gulf War, and would make the link to the current controversies over the renewal of Britain’s nuclear ‘deterrent’. Many of the pictures in *Recollections* can be made to look forwards as well as back, and indeed the tradition of engaged, politically informed documentary photography of which Griffiths was one of the most distinguished exponents, continues to survive even in the most difficult circumstances, with the unembedded photographers chronicling the devastation of Iraq. That tradition of photographic work still has urgent political tasks to perform, and it meant complete sense that four of its best practitioners chose Griffiths to introduce their book about Iraq.⁸ In their pictures, as with Griffiths’, as one turns page after page, the position of the neutral, disinterested or mildly entertained viewer, the mere spectator, dissolves.



Ban the Bomb Aldermaston march, England, 1960 © Philip Jones Griffiths/Magnum Photos

⁸ Ghaith Abdul-Ahad/ Kael Alford/ Thorne Anderson/ Rita Leistner, *Unembedded: Four Independent Photojournalists on the War in Iraq*, Chelsea Green Publishing Company, White River Junction, Vermont 2005.