PHILIP JONES GRIFFITHS INTERVIEW

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Philip Jones Griffiths. Photograph by Julian Stallabrass

Julian Stallabrass: Let's begin with the title, 'Middle Years'. Middle between what?

Philip Jones Griffiths: I've been asked that before today, and I think what happened was that some years ago I was finding pictures that I'd taken in the Fifties and Sixties and had put them into a folder called 'Middle Years' without thinking about it, and suddenly the exhibition ends up called 'Middle Years'. Not a lot of great thought went into it, but it's certainly the middle of the century and in some respects it was also my middle years. If you die when you're seventy, thirty-five is your middle years. I suppose I could have worked on something like 'On the Warpath' or 'Off to War' or 'Before the War' because all these pictures are taken before Vietnam.

JS: The photographs in the show anyway, I don't know about the prospective book, are all of Britain. Was there a connection between the title and Britain?

PJG: They're all pictures of Britain, they're all pictures taken *in* Britain. In that same period, I covered the Algerian War but still these pictures are all in Britain. They're close to home… hey, that would have been a good title: 'Close to Home'. There's still time to change it!

JS: Could we just talk a bit before the 'middle years', if you like, about how it was that you got into photography – I think it was partly through an interest in chemistry – but also how you learned to look 'photographically' because it's striking to look around this show and see how these images make strong graphic statements, and how much about photography many of them are. They're very much built upon photographic contrasts.

***Miners, Cwn Colliery* © Philip Jones Griffiths**

PJG: Well I'm sure if there was a movie about me…I think: here I am, I'm trapped in a little village in Wales. I know I've got to get out. My only fear in life is boredom, and it could get pretty boring then but I know I worked out a life…I was a joker. I went through the hobbies in alphabetical order, and all that, but still there was that feeling 'I've got to get out, I've got to spread my wings'. And the two things where I'd the greatest accomplishment apart from shooting rabbits with a machine gun was the fact I always won at painting — I got top marks for painting and drawing in school – and at the same time in the garden shed I was making high explosives, and blowing things up. So you could say there was a melding of art and science very early on. And then, when one got to about an age, when my parents thought 'Hey, we've cracked the problem' which was in those days in you educated your children you would never see them again because they pissed off to England because there were no jobs in Wales. But they thought 'Hey, we've cracked this –

if he becomes a *pharmacist*, he could be standing in the main road in our village in a white coat on and we won't lose him. He'll be around.' That's part of their motivation for suggesting I should become a pharmacist, but at the same time I joined the [Rhyl?] Camera Club. I was made aware for the first time in my life that magazines existed about photography. So I started devouring everything I could find on the subject, and it didn't take long to discover that there was something called Magnum – I discovered that very early on – who ran around the world, like Samurai or Zen warriors with a Leica around their neck, and changed the world, at least if not change the world, then show the world to people in a way that enabled them to make the change. And that seemed to be a magical thing to be able to do. In fact you might say even to this day, if you had to choose any one profession, the photographer's the one to be. I can think of nothing better than being a photographer, for a variety of reasons, the most obvious one is that you have access to everything. If I woke up tomorrow morning and said 'I really want to know whether the social conditions in Dubai are good for the poor of Dubai, or whatever, exploitative… if I wanted to know something quite erudite like that, I can actually get on a plane, go to Dubai and find out for myself. There are very few professions in the world that allow you to do that. 'Yeah', you think, 'I could be making films' – well the problem about making films is the sound recordist always wants to go to the toilet at the wrong time…so the way I describe it is the way of making movies is a bit like getting married, whereas being a photographer you stay single.

Now some people are like me, and there are a lot of people out there who aren't in the least bit interested what's going on anywhere. All they want is to sit there, watch TV and consume. And of course for those people I have nothing to say. So I understood very early on that photography represented this gateway out of the village, out of pharmacy… but the horrible truth is that I spent ten years of my life either studying or working as a pharmacist. There always seemed to be reasons for doing that, and the reasons had a lot to do with the fact that the magazines had all closed down, television had come, the great Bert Hardy, war photographer of the Korean War, was now shooting cigarette ads… I mean there were a lot of reasons and there was no *money*…. the idea with pharmacy you can become what is called a 'locum' pharmacist where you can take over someone's shop while they're on holiday and get paid around three times more than you would actually than if you were employed on a regular basis, and by doing a locum job you would have enough money to take pictures. There was a sort of a logic behind the decision to continue working as a pharmacist and then all of the time, the joke was, …photography… pharmacy… as one of the students might say…took it seriously. I took it very *un*seriously. When I was studying up in the northeast I wanted to be in Liverpool, and the only way I could get to Liverpool was to fail my exams in the northeast, and I can remember this lecturer who, I think she rather liked me, and we sort of had to identify samples of tissues and I would look down and see some bone and I'd say 'Red blood cells' and she's say 'Let me have a look', as if someone had mixed the microscopes up… so I had to dramatically fail so I could get to Liverpool because there I was able to become the theatre photographer for Sam Wanamaker's new theatre and that was a great opening. I saw it as a training of knowing how to photograph action, and you can repeat the action until you get it right. You could learn a lot. It was a great learning experience. So I knew I was never going to be a pharmacist, but I did A levels. As soon as I had the opportunity…I was always taking pictures. One of these pictures was taken whilst I was working as a pharmacist. I think I was wise, because I tried to work for the *Guardian*, which in those

days, only the *Guardian* and the *Observer* would give you the credit, so people would see my credit under a photograph, then they would call me with a job, and I would say 'I'm sorry, I'm busy!' but what I really meant was I couldn't take a day off because I've taken the last three days off and I'll lose my job as a pharmacist if I don't go in today so I can't do it. And I discovered something which is every time you say no, you're too busy, you get more offers, you get better jobs. It's something I'm always trying to tell my colleagues at Magnum, is don't ever be worried about turning down a job – it means more money next time. They don't listen. I'm digressing now. You could even say I'm wandering.

***Holiday outing* © Philip Jones Griffiths**

JS: No, it's fine. A good answer. When you started working for the *Guardian* and the *Observer* you were a freelancer. What kind of jobs were they giving you?

PJG: Every newspaper picture editor knows that there are certain things happening, so PR was very well regarded in those days. So someone would say 'So and so's giving talks, so and so's doing this, there's going to be a demonstration tomorrow at nine o'clock…'. All of that is *easy* to do. That's what everyone else does. The trick is take a look *behind*. So, for instance, my ordinary behaviour was such that I would never go for the obvious, I would always go around the back. I mean, as an example, the little girl that disappeared [Madeleine McCann]… I'm the sort of person who would go to the editor and say 'Why don't I get photographs of the parents holding up pictures of all the little black boys that have disappeared in the same period that we don't hear anything about because they're not pretty little girls?' In other words, there would be a connection with the news, but it would be a distaff [?] connection, it would a kind of honorary connection – the idea would be to make you think. I think looking back, it has very much to do with what it was like in …. My parents were always chastising me for asking 'Why?'. The word for 'why' in Welsh is 'pam' and I was always saying 'Pam? Pam? Pam?' [mimes being hit] 'Shut up! Don't ask so many questions!' So, I think that's what enabled me to get a lot of work published in the *Guardian*. Occasionally they would say 'August bank holiday – we need a picture from Southend-on-Sea of people enjoying themselves', so you do it. That's the traditional assignment. But my value, certainly to the *Guardian* in those days and certainly to the *Observer*, was to do with always try to look behind the news, trying to see something, trying to expand on it, trying to use it as a stepping stone, to break… rather than just 'blink'.

JS: I was just trying to get a sense of how much you directed yourself and your own interests in that sense.

PJG: With the *Guardian*, I would take a picture and then send it to them – pop it on the train and … but it was when I started working for the *Observer*, and although I did have a contract, …even to this day I think, I think what we've long since discovered with Magnum is that the photographer who says 'Hey, I've got a great story' – they're [the picture editors] much more interested in that than they are in you coming back saying 'Hey, that assignment you gave me…'.

JS: Some of the pictures taken in Wales are in square format. Were you using a 6x6 in those days?

PJG: Yes, it was a camera called the Agiflex. Prophetically from the 1950s. There was a camera made in Germany called the 'Reflex Korelle' and this was an English copy of the Reflex Korelle. It was a box…

JS: So you looked down at it?

PJG: Yes, you had to look down at it.

JS: So did you find it easier in a sense? I mean some of those pictures for instance the one of those guys standing outside a pub in [Brixton]… are really pretty extraordinary in terms of your proximity. Was it a sneaky camera to use?

***Outside Pentonville prison where their friend was hanged* © Philip Jones Griffiths**

PJG: No, my …it's true that in all the square pictures I think people are not paying much attention. What does it all mean? I don't know. There was a photographer who used to work for me who did all of his work with a Rolleiflex, which is essentially the same kind of camera, and if he saw something interesting he would set it up…and he'd cough and press the shutter. Then when he'd go home he had use this wonderful, huge mahogany enlarger – I used to joke that he put his … - and then he would make the pictures like cropping the negatives, which you could do if you knew anything about …in other words he never attempted to crop in the frame. And of course having been brought up on Cartier-Bresson when everything's to be composed exactly within the frame…

North Wales Valley, 1993 **© Philip Jones Griffiths**

JS: I was just thinking of people like Robert Doisneau and those French photographers, a lot of whom use Rolleiflexes in their photography and in some ways …you can just have them there and you don't need to … once you… you can frame it and you don't need to…

PJG: They are very different because, first of all, the first thing is it allows you to make them in quick succession, whereas if you have a smaller camera you … I've never really thought of it as more of a 'candid' camera, like a Leica, say. It has a lot to do with who you are and the way you behave, how calm you are, what your body language is and that incredible ability to feign yawns so everybody thinks you're bored, and then you look at your watch and [claps] – you've got your picture. There's a lot to do with those kinds of techniques. And every situation is slightly different so one technique doesn't work for everyone. But certainly, as far as I'm concerned, anybody reacting to the camera really isn't a good photograph.

JS: I was going to ask you about your relationships with the people you photograph.

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

PJG: Most of the time I don't even know who they are and they don't know who I am.

JS: Sometimes the captions suggest otherwise. I don't know that's true of the some of the *Vietnam Inc.*, … the girl who becomes a barmaid later on, the one in Wales.

PJG: Yes, but when I took that picture she did remember me, vaguely, years later, but I didn't stop … in fact, once you form a relationship then the ability to take candid photographs evaporates very quickly. On the other hand you're not rude either. If they want to talk to you, you talk to them… but at the same time, you don't want to get into a situation where… one of the problems about forming a relationship with the subject matter is that it doesn't take long before the subject matter wants to please you. Unless they're really stupid they can work out very quickly what will please you, and therefore they'll say 'Why don't we just do this? It would be a good picture for him' and they do something totally false to reward you for being nice to them. And that's what you don't want. What we all *dream* about is just being invisible. Impossible, in my case particularly.

JS: Did you find it easier to be invisible in Wales, in England or elsewhere you worked or was it always the same kind of problem?

PJG: First of all – it's never easy. However, there are one or two countries where it is incredibly easy. For instance, in Japan they just ignore you completely. There are some countries in which, no so much today, but in the early '80s in Hanoi, they would ignore you. In Saigon, you just couldn't work. When I went to Vietnam I'd been there for a week, a short time, and I said 'Look, I could do a book on palmistry in Vietnam because every time I lift the camera, all I would see in front of me are hands.' Really, totally impossible to work, to the point where …that book *Vietnam at Peace*… the difficulty in getting some of the simplest pictures – amazing. Committee's guest house and you think 'I'll get up at four in the morning' because it gets light at five thirty. I think two or three hundred kids would be waiting at four in the morning. And you'd walk down the street and the taller ones would be throwing the little ones in front of your feet to make you fall over; they would be kicking you in the back of your knees to make you trip; they would be throwing all kinds of garbage at you, and they're all shouting at the top of their lungs 'Ok! Ok! Ok!' In theory they were the Viet Cong of the country because there were none. It really was absolutely impossible to do anything. Of course the worst thing that can happen is you take revenge so that finally you make a plan and in the end you feel better for it but you still don't have your pictures. There were so many incidents like that in the early days.

A resident mows her lawn as a British soldier hides in her garden in Northern Ireland, 1973
© Philip Jones Griffiths

JS: So in looking at the range of pictures in the show, there are some of celebrities like the Beatles, and there are many wonderful, humorous shots, but also there's quite a lot on CND demonstrations, in particular quite a bit on the military and a certain amount on politicians, particularly Conservative politicians. How much of that would you say was directed by your own interests and how much of it was fulfilling the agendas of the newspapers you were working for?

PJG: I think in general, obviously …somebody wrote in a magazine that I was a political photographer and this rather interfering picture editor of the Observer had me photographing every politician. I didn't complain too much because I got a lot of good pictures out of it. Speaking of which, there's one picture of Crufts where the dog has obviously bitten the woman's finger. I was sent to Crufts by the picture editor of the Observer and it was not exactly my line of work. On the other hand there's a certain kind of challenge involved too. It's [adolescent], but there's still a challenge. It's Crufts, so you know The Sunday Times, The Sunday Telegraph and The Observer are all going to run a Crufts page on the Sunday, and who's going to have the best picture. So a bit of competition, *adolescent* competition, but still. Also, walking around, seeing things which don't add up, things which don't make sense, seeing things that made you laugh or cry is not bad training.

JS: In terms of those pictures of politicians, there are certain critical pictures of Tories, but not much else. I was wondering what your positive politics were as opposed to the Vietnam pictures?

***Edward Heath* © Philip Jones Griffiths**

PJG: First of all you have to admit that …we're surrounded in the world by ninety-nine per cent of all photography we see is to promote something, like 'Blair is the great…' or whatever, so I think it's valid to …elevated and I used to joke that I used to have a very bad Leica that had a lot of glare on it and I only used it to photograph Socialist Members of Parliament because it gave them a halo that made them look particularly godly – that's a joke, none of that actually happened. But I certainly …this work will eventually end up as a book, and one of the pictures in the book will certainly be Harold Wilson, not a flattering picture – it shows him …but certainly …that print isn't here anymore. Somebody bought it. And also Harold Macmillan and his wife – but what's interesting about that is that Macmillan and his wife aren't looking at each other, because she had this long, long relationship with Boothby. He had an affair lasting thirty years with Macmillan's wife, so that's why Macmillan and his wife never got it on. She was always with Boothby. So when I saw them standing together on that balcony in Llandudno I took Thursday afternoon off from the chemist in Rhyl to go to Llandudno, and that's where I got that picture. They're facing each other but looking past each other…I think to be fair I should publish that picture.

JS: So would you say that your position is something more like a 'Spitting Image' view of the world where all these people are fairly equally to be distrusted and viewed as sharks and …

PJG: Yes, and … I certainly wouldn't include President Roosevelt or Chomsky. I think all people …should be made fun of.

JS: What struck me is that, although there are some pictures of Wales and the north of England about industrial dereliction, there are some of modernisation and building, such as the Edgware Road picture. There's not much about industrial relations or industrial unrest.

***Edgeware Road* © Philip Jones Griffiths**

PJG: I think you're right there. I'm not making excuses, but a lot of this work were negatives that were lost and then found at The Observer and they were found and given at some point to some photo agency…. I thought it was… but it turned out to be, someone said ….they were going to throw these boxes of negatives out but they returned them to the Observer. But they didn't return all of them so I have lost a lot of material and when it comes to… I can remember photographing strikes and that kind of thing. So a lot of stuff has got lost. But I think you've been very perceptive in your general observation. I don't have any pictures of … or the rest of them. Even though I did photograph … in South America for some reason….

JS: Do you think they will still make the book?

…

JS: I was wondering too about captioning, because obviously with big projects like *Vietnam Inc.* and *Agent Orange* you're able to have three types of text running through those books. They're extremely well worked out and there's something very rigorous about the organisation of the pictures, and the way that the text works with the pictures. The captions – a lot of them come from *Dark Odyssey* – which is more of a portmanteau book. I was wondering what you were planning for the book of *Middle Years*, or 'Close to Home'….

PJG: We live in a real world…in the end, you're quite right in saying, one caption is considerably longer than the other. In the book, the Moseley picture will be surrounded by pictures of his men, the BNP people, pictures of Moseley himself and that kind of thing, and there will be more words to contextualise what is happening in Britain at that time. And that's not

JS: I guess it's the first historical book you've done, in that you're commenting on something that has long past.

PJG: Yes.

JS: So do you think it requires a different sort of approach, or a different sort of text or you found… or somebody else's?

PJG: I wasn't thinking of that, no. Realistically, there was a…. about Moseley. I've got to go back and do research. My memory isn't that good, at the best of times. So you're going to have to go back and check on the facts… find something interesting…

JS: Is this your first exhibition?

PJG: I suppose it is – I think of it as being the first. Technically, it's not quite the first. I was in an exhibition with [John Pilger?]'s as well. His photography …. When the Falklands War broke out, I'd actually been to the Falklands a couple of years earlier and had a series of pictures of the Falklands, which I think the Photographers' Gallery put on. I'm not even sure whether '71… but I've never

JS: You could compare your career to Don McCullin, would be an obvious example, who's, after a time anyway, started to take gallery exhibitions and museum exhibitions very seriously. Why would you say you have never done that? Is it something about your work do you think, the character of your work?

PJG: I could say I hate… they cause varicose veins! But the truth is, we're all who we are, I've really felt that it's important to keep going, and to check things out and keep shooting pictures. The idea of… it's like buying a walking stick or something. It's a sign that you're old and decrepit. The idea of having exhibitions is the sign of, in a sense, that you've come to the end of something, you're not able to shoot anymore. A lot of people say 'No – you've got to respect you're work' so in the end, when you get sick especially, it does

concentrate the mind rather well on trying to sort stuff out in the best way to sort stuff out. The book in your hand, in fact, was the result of an exhibition I had in Houston, and for the first time in my life, I emptied my life's work….that was like the first sweep, as it were, of trying to find stuff. That's really happened because I got to the point where I felt if I don't at least make a start on it I'll be [bobbing like logs] and everything will be a total mess.

JS: Have you found the experience a relatively new one for you? Have you found it a stimulating and enjoyable one, and do you think there's something about seeing your work at this scale for instance which…

PJG: Yes, but I still think the book is much better… but if it gets a little boost from the exhibition, they why not? I think the solitary sitting in college with a book on your knee – that's the way to change the world.

JS: What do you think that this book will say to people in Britain today? What do you think the relevance of these pictures is, now for us, British looking at ourselves?

PJG: First of all, the book will be different from the exhibition. What I will try to do in the book is to essentially demonstrate a way in which people are, and always have been, manipulated. That's the most important message that, on the simplest level, don't believe anything you're ever told. Of course that's described as wanton cynicism …but the fact is so much of what we are told or have been told has been done to persuade us to behave against our own interests. Now, you might say 'You can't really believe that – pictures are too disparate', and indeed then if I was in the process of putting the book together and found didn't sustain that, in other words there were not enough pictures that demonstrate that, then in that case it would be perfectly respectful, perfectly honourable to do what you might call a *historical* exhibition in which we say, look, this is what is what is what it was like. You deduce what you want from these historical images. So I keep saying in a perfect world, it would be needless to change it but if all we've achieved is to have a record, that in itself is very valuable, so that's why I don't knock people who do what you might call 'historical' photography. But let there be no confusion – I'm not talking about Gursky and photographs ostensibly historical and then changes them with photoshop and falsifying them to the point where they are not anything, they're not history, they're not art, they're just objects which look nice. Ludicrous people buy them …