

NEW DIRECTIONS

The invasion of Iraq that commenced in March 2003 did not bring about the ‘domino theory of democracy’ that the Bush government had hoped for. On the contrary, five years later the war is still raging and there is no end in sight. In fact the situation on the ground has deteriorated so much that it has become too dangerous for photographers to make the sort of long journey through Iraq that Van Kesteren made in the wake of the invasion.

Never before in history have so many journalists, cameramen and photographers been killed in a single war. The organization Reporters without Borders has kept count over five years of conflict in Iraq: 209 journalists and media assistants killed, two missing and 14 kidnapped. Van Kesteren has himself desisted from travelling to Iraq for the last three years. As a photographer his life would be in danger, or he would have had to limit himself to the ‘safe’ Green Zone in Baghdad or trips with American troops.

From the large volume of photographic work he produced in 2003 and 2004, Van Kesteren compiled the book Why Mister, Why?, its title expressing the Iraqis’ incomprehension of the fate that has befallen them. The publication won various important awards, so that in their ‘Book of Books’, Parr and Badger write:

Already, what is being regarded as the second Gulf War’s equivalent to Vietnam Inc. has been published. Why Mister, Why? by Geert van Kesteren, a Dutch photographer embedded with US forces, is a photobook in the best concerned-photographer tradition. It takes the same kind of sceptical and independent tone as that adopted by Jones Griffiths back in 1971, always focusing upon the impact of the conflict on non-combatants and setting the whole event in a considered political context.¹

Struck by the sheer numbers of Iraqi refugees being reported, Van Kesteren visited Syria, Jordan and Turkey in early 2007. Later that year he returned to Syria and Jordan, to where the vast majority of the two million or more Iraqi refugees have fled. He made several photo-reportages, incorporating personal accounts of refugees with whom he spoke at length.

Even so, Van Kesteren found it difficult to capture the drama. ‘My photography did not in any way square up to the horror of the stories of the refugees,’ he explains. ‘It missed what I see as the cornerstone of my photojournalism: the laying bare of the essence of a situation and making that visual through the perspective of the individual. I got frustrated with the content of the pictures; they show the daily life of the refugees, but what does that give us? The refugee rents an apartment, tries to find a little job, lives off his savings and survives until the money runs out – for there is no outside support. This suffering is not as photogenic as, for instance, the plight of the refugees from Kosovo, who trekked through the snow-decked mountains, wounded and destitute. The suffering of the Iraqi refugees is so much less obvious.’²

¹ Martin Parr and Gerry Badger, The Photobook: A History, Volume 2, (London: Phaidon 2006), p. 239.

² Interview with Geert van Kesteren, January 2007.

In early 2007, when Van Kesteren spoke with a group of doctors in Amman, Jordan, one of them showed an image taken using mobile phone, a portrait of their wounded friend just before he died. That image echoed the stories Van Kesteren had recorded during the many extensive interviews with people who had fled Iraq. He realized that mobile phone images were of great importance to Iraqis, living within or outside their fatherland.

In mid 2006, *The New York Times* reported on the use of mobile phones in Iraq: Cellphones have long been considered status symbols in developing countries, Iraq included. But in an environment where hanging out is potentially life threatening, cellphones are also a window into dreams and terrors, the macabre local sense of humor and Iraqis' resilience amid the swells of violence.

The business here is booming. According to figures published last month by the State Department, there are now 7.1 million cellphone subscribers in Iraq, up from 1.4 million two years ago. In an economy where jobs can be as scarce as rain, billboards for phones are among the only advertisements updated regularly in the capital. ...

It is the relentless violence – which now claims dozens of Iraqis every day – that seems to have fertilized the industry's growth. Insurgents use phones to communicate and to detonate bombs, while Iraqis of all sects rely on their phones to avoid danger.³

In addition, Van Kesteren noticed that refugees use their mobile phones as family albums. He also came across the gruesome fact that for criminals and murderers the mobile phone is an important tool, as in the case where a kidnapper uses the mobile of the victim to contact the family or where the coroner uses the mobile of the dead person to inform the bereaved family of their loss. Against this background, Van Kesteren decided to let the pictures of ordinary, non-professional photographers tell the story this time.

With the assistance of a small team he collected many hundreds of photos. Iraqi refugees in Jordan asked friends and acquaintances for more material. In Amsterdam the team established contact with people inside and outside Iraq via blogs and Facebook, and these also supplied photos. The wealth of material they amassed was astounding. Many photos proved inappropriate to the book's objective of presenting a journalistic narrative. Pictures of American soldiers, for example, firing guns while seated on a donkey, because of the risk of digital editing, or portraits of insurgents with rocket-propelled grenade launchers and AK-47s at the ready were rejected, because of their suspect provenance or propagandistic nature. As far as possible the team verified the source of the photos and cleared the rights to use them in Baghdad Calling. If there was any doubt, photos were set aside, however spectacular. The task was further complicated when it turned out that photos in the albums were often from official press agencies, though this made it clear that Iraqi civilians have made the mobile phone into the modern equivalent of the newspaper. They use it to inform one another of private and public events in the theatre of war. These photos are also posted to chat and forum websites, password protected or not, where Iraqis from

³ Damien Cave, 'Must Haves: Cellphones Top Iraqi Cool List', The New York Times, 8 August 2006.

Europe, America and the Middle East exchange information in relatively small circles.

This book presents a selection of the images that are sent to family and friends by Iraqi people in and outside the war zone. I find some of the photographs intensely moving, as I feel they are a direct link to the people who are featured in the news every day, but whom we never really encounter. Though the photographs are not always particularly well taken, somehow the fact that the images have not come through the filters of professional photographers, who are often outsiders, increases their narrative power.

By giving such prominence to those pictures, Van Kesteren took a bold step. His own work no longer takes central place in this publication; it is a book that gives the Iraqis their own voice. Their story is of paramount importance in this book, not the photographs of Van Kesteren.

Van Kesteren collected data. This book is therefore a new departure in photojournalism. Many photographers are looking for ways to enhance the power of their message. They are forced to do this by a dearth of editorial outlets in the West. Assignments from magazines and newspapers seem to be dwindling, challenged by the new media offering interesting means of telling stories and conveying information.

It is notable that photographic books can be seen as a medium that is heading in new directions. Now that magazines are showing less interest in probing stories, photographers are turning to autonomous production of a medium tailored to their personal wishes and vision. A book is a wonderful medium for this, as are websites and multimedia. There is greater leeway to explore stories in depth, to add nuance, broach aspects for which no space is available in conventional media such as magazines and newspapers.

Let us return to the subject of this book. In Van Kesteren's own words, 'Even though Why Mister, Why? and Baghdad Calling are different books dealing with different chapters in Iraq's recent history, I would like to conclude both of them with the same appeal: Though Iraq is no longer Iraq, the country is calling out, even screaming, for attention, for initial steps towards reconciliation, peace, for a future in which people are once again willing and able to trust one another. Do not abandon the Iraqis; let Western countries shoulder their responsibilities.'

Brigitte Lardinois

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¹ Martin Parr and Gerry Badger, The Photobook: A History, Volume 2 (London: Phaidon 2006), p. 239.

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