



*Somalia, 1992, Media
photograph a victim of the
famine caused by fighting
between competing
warlords.*

**“We keep telling
the stories and
the world keeps
ignoring them”**

**Academic Paul Lowe reflects on his journey
as a photographer and the various ways to
communicate stories and events that shape the
landscape of contemporary society**

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Although he is an award-winning photographer who has been published in *TIME*, *Newsweek*, *Life*, *The Sunday Times Magazine*, *The Observer*, and *The Independent*, Paul Lowe didn't start out as a photographer. He actually studied History and Philosophy at the University of Cambridge for his bachelor's degree. Although just before he enrolled, he asked his mum to buy him a decent camera. "I guess she thought it would just be another kind of flash in the pan," he reflects.

But it turned out not to be so. He worked as a journalist for a student newspaper, and then, in the mid-1980s, along with his friends, Lowe went out to Nicaragua to develop a story and short film about the country after the revolution. "I really fell in love with the photographs. You could almost take a map of the world and stick a pin in it and say, 'I want to go there and find out what's happening and do a story', which is hardly possible with print media, or radio or broadcast as you're pretty much tied because of language."

After graduating from Cambridge, he took a postgraduate course in Photography at what was then Gwent College of Higher Education (nowadays University of Wales). He left in 1988 – just as the revolutions in Eastern Europe were beginning to happen – ready to start working as a young photographer in his mid-20s. "I was lucky to put myself in the right time at the right place enough to cover the Red Wave of revolutions and huge political events."

"I was lucky enough to put myself in the right time at the right place"

He covered such events as the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Romanian Revolution, and Glasnost and Perestroika in the former Soviet Union. Paul then committed himself to exploring the breakup of the former Yugoslavia, particularly focusing on the Siege of Sarajevo.

"Many times I did feel danger. You're always making calculations about whether the risk that you're taking is worth it. Retrospectively looking back on it, now in my 50s with a family, probably nothing was worth it. Friends of mine have been killed and injured, hundreds of people that I have come across have been killed and injured, and hundreds of people that I photographed have been killed and injured. Thankfully I survived, but you can never do everything, particularly in situations like Sarajevo or Chechnya where it's very unpredictable. You don't know when a shelling is going to start or a sniper is going to start shooting".

The course that he now runs at LCC, MA Photojournalism and Documentary Photography, is in many respects the brainchild of his own Master's studies: it was designed specifically for people to convert to photography from other paths of career. "My career has come full circle, because now, as an academic, I'm very much more historian. But even when I was photographing news, I guess I kind of

Portrait of
Paul Lowe:
Justin McKie





had that historian's analytical perspective."

He says his experience as a photographer in the midst of war influences his practice with students. A lot of Lowe's work revolves around media ethics. He believes that bearing witness to somebody else's story, even if nobody else hears it, is in and of itself a worthy act ethically — because it's an act of respect. "My experience has been, fundamentally, as a species, we are storytellers. And people find the act of telling their story, very important."

The main ethical thoughts he tries to instill in his students is the question of what they are going to do with that story, and how important authenticity in communication is, but he has learned a bitter lesson too. "I think that we learnt in Bosnia, and particularly the Siege of Sarajevo. The very disturbing and frightening aspect of that is that this was something that it could have been foreseen, and the world in various different ways allowed it to happen. We keep telling the stories and the world keeps ignoring them, but, on the

*Fall of the Berlin Wall,
November 1989*

*Opposite above:
Somalia 1992 children at a
feeding centre, Baidoa*

*Opposite below: Chechnya,
1995 aftermath of a russian
gunship attack on a
civilian convoy, Grozny*



"As a species, we are storytellers"

other hand, if we didn't do that, would things be even worse?"

He is currently part of an Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded project: "Art & Reconciliation: Conflict, Culture and Community". The project came about through a connection Paul had with King's College London, especially with Professor James Gow (who was also one of the very first witnesses at the International Crime Unit Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia) and Dr Rachel Kerr. They were joined by the London School of Economics in a three-year project whose goal was to examine what reconciliation meant in a broad and narrow perspective. They have analysed a plethora of comparative studies between Bosnia, Rwanda, Colombia and the Middle East.

At LCC, the researchers have looked specifically at the roles of art in post-conflict society. They worked with the Historical Museum of Bosnia Herzegovina and a couple of other arts organisations. They also commissioned artists from the region, mostly younger people in their 30s, who had grown up as children during the war and had built their artistic practice predominantly during the post-war years. The work they created was later displayed at several exhibitions.

"What we really found was how can art and artistic practices and museums and art galleries provide spaces different to the mainstream spaces of political and social and economic dialogue,

almost like a kind of parallel universe, where different sorts of realities, different sorts of possibilities can be imagined.

"Probably a moment that really brought it together was when we had an exhibition in London: they were all sitting around a table, there was an artist in Slovenia, from Belgrade, from Serbia, from Bosnia, all talking to each other about all sorts of things. It really did make me think that the important thing we've done is to bring people together". ●

