

# Dreams, desires and aspirations

by Yvette Greslé

The photograph, one of modernity's most ubiquitous visual forms, pervades our experience of the world. In an age of heightened consumerism, photographic images can embody our dreams, desires and aspirations. Photographs amplify the effect of the headlines reverberating off daily newspapers. On a more intimate scale, snapshots or portraits, in albums and picture frames, document our everyday lives, our rites of passage and our family histories. Some photographs, having achieved iconic status, come to represent an event, an era or an emotion. Examples are the many memorable photographs shot by photojournalists or soldiers during the political conflicts of the 20th and 21st centuries.

Several images come to mind: Huynh Cong Ut's horrifying 1972 photograph of Vietnamese children fleeing a napalm strike, a frightened, naked child at its centre; Sam Nzima's photograph of Hector Pieterse so poignantly capturing the tragedy of 16 June 1976 and, more recently, the degrading images, by an unknown American soldier, of US soldiers torturing Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison. These particular photographs capture – within the midst of large-scale political battles – humanity in all its terrifying vulnerability.

The political currency that a photograph carries is an important factor in ensuring its iconic status, cultivated by such factors as its international circulation and its continued appropriation. Sometimes photographs reso-

nate with one another in powerful ways. News photographer Thomas E. Franklin commenting on his photograph of three firefighters raising the American flag among the ruins of the Twin Towers, recalled: "As soon as I shot it, I realised the similarity to the famous image of the Marines raising the flag at Iwo Jima." This Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph, taken in 1945 by Joe Rosenthal, depicts United States soldiers raising the American flag at the summit of Mount Suribachi during the Battle of Iwo Jima in World War 2. It was later used by Felix de Weldon to sculpt the Marine Corps War Memorial situated just outside Washington DC.

In their forthcoming book *Icons of Liberal Democracy: Public Culture in an Age of Photojournalism*, scholars John Lucaites and Robert Hariam argue that photojournalism and documentary photography do more than facilitate the memory of landmark moments. Speaking to journalist Ryan Piurek, Lucaites comments on the Abu Ghraib photographs: "It was the photographs, released and disseminated on the Internet, that gave significance and presence to that event and got people exercised about it. Those photographs told us nothing new. But they visualised it. They put us in the position to see something about democracy that upset us."

Franklin, speaking about his now iconic 9/11 image (it even appeared on a postage stamp) commented: "This was an important shot. It told more than just death and destruction. It said something to me about

the strength of the American people and of these firemen having to battle the unimaginable."

There is often a chance element to the act of taking the photograph that comes to represent so much. According to the version of events that surround the Nzima photograph, the dying Hector Pieterse was picked up by Mbuyisa Makhubo who together with Pieterse's sister Antoinette ran towards Sam Nzima's press car. In an interview with journalist Lucille Davie, Nzima recalls: "I saw a child fall down. Under a shower of bullets I rushed forward and went for the picture... I was the only photographer there at the time. Other photographers came when they heard the shots." The history of Nzima's photograph, today a symbol of the events of 16 June 1976, the brutality of the apartheid regime and, in actual fact, the genesis of the Hector Pieterse Museum in Soweto, speaks of the power embedded in the photographic image. ■

## References

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# Yours, mine and ours

by Anthea Garman

When *Grocott's Mail* in Grahamstown wanted to use the Hector Pieterse photograph for the front cover of a Youth Day supplement celebrating the courage of the Soweto students of 1976, they decided to go the official route by contacting the photographer's agent and paying for the picture. They were told a single use would cost them thousands of rands. Obviously an impossibility for a small-town, community newspaper.

I was curious. The picture was all over the show as NGOs, the news media and various government departments celebrated the 30th anniversary of June 16th. In many cases the picture – grainy and often photocopied – was obviously being used without permission and the photographer, Sam Nzima, whose name has only recently become attached to it as the creator of that iconic picture, was as absent as his picture was present.

I contacted him to ask some questions and thus began a conversation in which he talked about his complicated relationship with that particular picture, which has attained huge symbolic – and international – status in a way only a few photographs achieve. But it is also the picture that ruined his career as a journalist and forced him to flee his home in Soweto. It is a picture that, while revered as "history" and

owned as "belonging to the people", is often used indiscriminately without reference to its maker or his rights. It is a picture whose use often fills him with anger as he attempts to curtail its publication and assert his rights as its author. As a result the value attached to the picture in rands climbs steeply as its unauthorised use proliferates (even if the images are growing fuzzier and more indistinct with time).

When an image comes to speak so powerfully for the events of history and comes to mean so much that millions assert their ownership of it emotionally and symbolically, how does its owner assert his rights to control its uses? What is the creative balance between *ours* and *mine*?

Recently Levi Strauss announced an Aids-awareness campaign in which the Pieterse image would be recreated with the child in arms dying of Aids. ANC Youth League president Fikile Mbalula responded: "People should not use national symbols, including the picture, for their own profit-making interests and insult our history, our moral integrity and the integrity of the struggle." While Nzima wasn't asked his opinion, his son was horrified.

The amazing coincidence is that had that particular child not been shot at that moment, had that photographer not been crouching in the right place at that exact time, the memorial which stands might have been known not as the Hector Pieterse Memorial but the — — Memorial.

Many other authors of iconic pictures of South African struggle heroes have received the same fate: who took the ubiquitous Steve Biko picture? Who snapped Sobukwe? Who was the author of the face of Hani on the T-shirts?

By chance I discovered the author of the much-used Matthew Goniwe picture, Professor Julian Cobbing, in the history department at Rhodes University. Cobbing was an aspiring photographer in the 80s and had a loose attachment to the band of photographers called Afrapix. His picture – at a funeral in 1985 – was taken six weeks before Goniwe was murdered. Cobbing has another career and an assured income so he doesn't feel as stressed about his picture as Nzima feels about his. Nevertheless, every now and again a couple of hundred rands will arrive when someone doing the right thing has paid Cobbing for the use of the picture. But he has also been alerted of an agency that has appropriated his pic for their own uses and is selling it.

He feels strongly, however, that picture and creator should never be parted in the minds of media consumers. Iconic pictures, he feels, have a "double impact", there is the symbolic worth attached to the subject matter and the acknowledgement of the creator of that captured moment. Both are "part of the archetype of the photograph", he says. ■