BOOK REVIEW

The Lost Rolls 1988–2012
By Ron Haviv, edited by Robert Peacock
Blurb, 2015
unpaginated/$45.00 (hb)

For every news photograph published to illustrate or document an event, countless others never make it to print. For his latest book, The Lost Rolls 1988–2012 (2015), the photojournalist Ron Haviv turned to his archive of undeveloped film—pictures that, over more than twenty years of his three-decade-long career, never made it off the roll. This was a brave choice, not least given that the photographer has a substantial record of widely circulated, award-winning photojournalism, particularly of sites of conflict and postconflict, that he might have mined instead. A cofounder of the VII Photo Agency, Haviv may be best known for his work on the 1990s Balkan Wars and their aftermath, which he spent a decade documenting. (This work includes his iconic photograph of a Serb soldier kicking a dying Bosnian Muslim woman, which Susan Sontag wrote about in the New Yorker, of a Serb soldier kicking a dying Bosnian Muslim woman, which Susan Sontag wrote about in the New Yorker, of a Serb soldier kicking a dying Bosnian Muslim woman, which Susan Sontag wrote about in the New Yorker, of a Serb soldier kicking a dying Bosnian Muslim woman, which Susan Sontag wrote about in the New Yorker.) Curating from among his forgotten and unseen photographs enables Haviv to push at photography’s most elemental tensions, most notably—and most effectively—the very thin line (if there is one at all) between photojournalism and art.

The Lost Rolls is comprised of seventy-four black-and-white and color photos that Haviv took between 1988 and 2012 (with one photo from 2015). Some show well-known subjects, like former President Bill Clinton, former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani, and tennis star Andre Agassi. Others have the familiar look of news photography, even if their events are not immediately recognizable, such as a photo of a soldier with the White House in the background; what looks like a detective document—ing a murder scene; and an array of human skulls at the genocide memorial in Kigali, Rwanda, two of which have holes in their crania. Still other images seem to come specifically from Haviv’s private life, such as a shot of a woman lying in bed, her face obscured by her hair. The public and private scenes included here mirror the way we remember: in our minds, flashbulb memories of public events (dignitaries at a ceremony, CNN reporting on war) run alongside images of concurrent private moments (so-and-so’s wedding, that final trip with an ex).

An index at the book’s end provides basic information about the photographs and when they were taken (e.g., “Bosnia, 2000”). In the book, some photos are accompanied by Haviv’s recollections, which are also spare (“swimmers on a beach—perhaps ny in the summer, coney island probably”). But the photos do not need these details in order for the viewer to “read” them. In fact, the book works best in those spreads without the written texts of Haviv’s recollections; his words seem to ground them too precisely. That’s because what makes these photos effective, as Lauren Walsh writes in her introduction, is that we can tell, largely, that the photographs originated as photojournalism, as personal work, or, perhaps, as both (dogs and cats scattered throughout an archaeological site in Turkey beside a photo of the Clintons standing in the same frame). That Haviv’s photographs do not need written words to be understood and categorized speaks as much to the quality of the images themselves as to their presence within that well of pictures that comprise public culture, and that we draw on when encountering, reading, and categorizing pictures: this shows “evil,” this shows “love,” this shows “war,” and so on. And yet, part of what makes this book so compelling is that, while the photos are so readable, Haviv’s images resist such simplistic notions of spectacle.

Visually, many of the photos here bare the material effects of time on undeveloped film: colors have “shifted, light [has] leaked, and mold [has] taken over,” as Haviv writes. As news photographs, such images would be unusable, like the photograph of candles and mourners at Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin’s coffin, which has hundreds of light spots (light leaks? fogged film?) that look like stars or small flames, or the yellowed photo of a charred building, its windows shot out, in Sarajevo. But in the context of the book, these pictures read as art images and take on additional levels of meaning: their gauzy, foggy qualities seem like the manifestation of memory, which is hazy, imprecise. Moreover, because the scenes resemble others in the economy of news images, they call into question the authority we grant to such images to show a fixed truth. In that way, they are news photos and not news photos—they both build upon photojournalistic images and take them apart. In so doing, they also speak to art photographers practicing similar deconstructive techniques in their work, such as Curtis Mann, who uses bleach to destroy photos of war, and whose Middle East news-photos-turned-into-art were shown at the 2010 Whitney Biennial.

This imprecision, the photos’ loosening from a fixed reality, is amplified by Haviv’s admission that he has forgotten having taken some of the photographs here, and cannot recall some of the subjects at all. That imprecision seems important, and speaks to the photographs’ journey from (primarily) evidentiary photojournalism to art. While photographs have long occupied a tense, slippery relationship as both “scientific” (objective) and “artistic” (subjective), these photos show plainly the porosity of such distinctions, and the degree to which their identity depends largely on the vehicle in which they are presented: newspaper, art book, family album.
MEDIA NOTED

While that assertion might not seem radical to imagemakers or scholars of visual culture, there still exists, in the public culture, a fixed line between art- and newsmaking, between photographs as subjective objects made by people and objective images made by machines. In the academy, such departments live in entirely different schools (even in the same university), speak different vocabularies, and command different, sometimes conflicting, ethical and visual considerations. We (still!) rely on photographs as evidence in the courtroom—indeed, the International Criminal Court used Haviv’s photos and captions of the Balkan Wars as evidence in trials for war crimes. News organizations’ guidelines for photojournalism speak to the persistent belief in the medium’s objectivity, even though, because of distance, size of frame, and what makes it into the picture, all photos are fundamentally subjective. As such, this book marks an important contribution to the ongoing conversation about the nature of the photograph.

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Visual Journeys Through Wordless Narratives: An International Inquiry with Immigrant Children and The Arrival
Edited by Evelyn Arizpe, Teresa Colomer, and Carmen Martínez-Roldán/Bloomsbury Academic/2015/288 pp./$140.00 (hb)

Children’s reading responses in the study reflected their own lives and concerns. Children created dialogues, inserting their own words in order to make sense of the narrative contained in the wordless graphic novels. This allowed them to safely explore possible meanings and develop deeper comprehension of what they read. Their responses described concern about the financial hardship suffered by The Arrival’s protagonist, a migrant from an unidentified country; experiences of violence in their own countries of origin; and the fear they felt about coming to a new country. Other themes expressed by the participants included issues involving emotional distance and empathy development.

While images are sometimes marginalized in educational texts as mere scaffolding to understand written words, this book makes the case that an intertextual literacy experience, or even an experience based mainly in images, can be valuable for children from diverse backgrounds. In this instance, children offered profound discussion of their own experiences as immigrants as they related themselves to texts they read, and reflected on their lives as they encountered the semiotics of artwork found in wordless picture books.

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