

It's All About The Image: Back To Basics



“Off Limits“

**The Story of a Picture and the Spring of Bratislava 1968
Malta, the Birth of Europe and the Four Elements**

Facing Future Challenges through Inter-Cultural Dialogue

by Steve Lake

CEPIC'S stated aim of encouraging delegates to 'see pictures again' at this year's Congress in Malta may seem strange. Do 800 delegates, all engaged in the business of creating and selling photography, need to be reminded that seeing pictures is what it's all about?

Maybe they do. Sitting in an audience of one watching Gilbert Duclos' film 'Off Limits' on Saturday afternoon, it was hard to escape the feeling that the stock photography business has become all business and no photography.

A shame. Because two of the events not only showcased outstanding pictures but also raised vital issues about the business of photography.

Duclos' film highlighted – through bitter personal experience – the way in which privacy laws are suffocating the work of street photographers, men and women shooting reportage and documentary in the grand tradition of Cartier-Bresson.

Sued for \$10,000 by a girl he snapped on the streets of Montreal, Duclos went all the way to the Supreme Court.....and lost. The image was featured in an editorial piece in a small magazine celebrating city life in Canada; no advertising, no negative context. He hadn't even charged the magazine a reproduction fee. Duclos was simply the victim of an unsigned model release form and a girl with a litigious lawyer.

Interspersing his own story with the work and opinions of his fellow photojournalists, Duclos presents a compelling case that our visual heritage is under threat. For the issue at the heart of this is not privacy but greed.

When images of the Eiffel Tower at night are restricted, not out of respect for Gustave Eiffel's design (long since in the public domain) but because the guy who designed the lighting is still alive and eyeing a pension fund top-up, we know we're in trouble. How long before real life photography is completely replaced by lifestyle photography – clean, fully-released and anaemic?

The Bielik family's experience of the world of photojournalism should give us pause before we mount any moral high horses. With an audience swelled to nearly 10 by the presence of some loyal fellow-Slovaks, Peter Bielik – son of photojournalist Ladislav – took us through the story of 'The Spring of Bratislava, 1968'.

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His father's iconic image of the bare-chested man standing in the path of a Soviet tank has been published worldwide. And only once with the permission of the copyright holder.

With Bielik and his originals going underground in the face of Soviet reprisals, the German press agency DPA copied the picture from the local newspaper in which it was first used. Cropped, retouched and captioned wrongly as Prague not Bratislava (that sent a frisson through the Slovaks present) the picture was subsequently used around the world under a bewildering variety of bylines.

When the originals were discovered following Ladislav's death and the Velvet Revolution of 1989, the Bielik family embarked on a long legal struggle for ownership and copyright, finally winning a court ruling in 2005.

must confess to being initially sympathetic towards DPA. At a time of revolution behind the Iron Curtain it can't have been easy establishing the provenance of the picture; no credit appeared when it was first used. And the argument that this was a picture that needed to find as wide an audience as possible is compelling.

Less excusable is their refusal to acknowledge ownership when the originals were discovered and their continued marketing of the image against the Bieliks' wishes. When it was discovered that a cut of the royalties had been going to the German student who smuggled the original newspaper out of Bratislava, my professional solidarity evaporated.

Wandering though the exhibition, I was struck less by the famous tank shot with its uncanny premonition of Tiananmen Square than by Bielik's studies of the Soviet soldiers – by turns aggressive, scared and bored.

Peter Bielik is now considering his options for the future distribution of his father's images. He is understandably cautious.

Noble attempts to inject some local Maltese colour into proceedings proved less successful.

Peter Paul Barbara's workshop on his book 'Elements of Change' – a study of the island through earth, water, air and fire – contained some striking images, his black and white pictures of storm-wracked coastlines more redolent of the West of Ireland than the Southern Mediterranean. It was interesting to see a side of Malta not readily available to those of us holed up in the Intercontinental.

But Peter's presentation was delivered at the same speed as my taxi driver drove while covering the distance between airport and hotel in under 5 minutes. This was a man more comfortable with a camera in his hand than a microphone.

Valetta was the venue for the EU sponsored photographic exhibition 'Facing Future Challenges through Inter-Cultural Dialogue'. No, I have no idea what that means either. And, having seen the exhibition, I still have no idea. Tiny, badly printed and haphazardly hung, the pictures were dwarfed by the impressive proportions of the neo-classical Ministry of Tourism.

The whole exhibition bore the hallmark of a school art project. I think we've moved on from the days when a church spire and a minaret in the same frame represent an effective illustration of religious diversity.



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Quality still matters. The global photography community gathered in Malta shouldn't lose sight of that fact. We still need to look at the pictures, not just the balance sheet.

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