



# Behind the lens

Staff photographer **Leon Neal** offers his take on what it is that makes a good press photographer. He talks to **Oliver Atwell**



**Above: Fashion shoots are a situation that can find photographers vying for space among a heaving mass of press**

**IT IS** fair to say that these days the general public tend to take the images that they see in newspapers and online for granted. Print journalism and news websites are saturated with photographs taken by an endless stream of press photographers and often even the readers. However, it can sometimes be interesting to look behind the camera and get to know the man or woman with their finger over the shutter release. Press photography is not the simple task that many people may assume, as behind the lens myriad thoughts and considerations are flying through the press photographer's mind.

Leon Neal has been a staff photographer for the international news and photo agency Agence France-Press for the past five years, a job that followed a number of years as a press photographer working at *The Times* newspaper. His accomplished images stand out from the crowd and demonstrate that press photography can be an art form in itself. Leon's images are able to communicate a narrative through an assured sense of composition, lighting and, on many occasions, a good deal of humour.

Leon says that his love of current affairs was crucial in his decision to become a press

photographer. The chance to combine his interest in news events and photography was too strong to resist.

'Getting into press photography was inevitable,' Leon reveals. 'To be able to marry my two principal interests was very appealing. It also gave me a great opportunity to see lots of new things and meet so many interesting people. It can be unpredictable as you're working on something different every day. You often don't know what you're going to be working on until the evening before or even that morning. For me, that was the major appeal. You never have a chance to get bored.'

Suffice to say, press imagery is a vital component in educating the public in what is going on around the world. The importance of photography in this respect is something that Leon believes wholeheartedly.

'Stills and video are the two major players with regards to informing the public about current events,' he says. 'But photography is more than able to hold its own against moving imagery. Photography is a medium that still resonates strongly with the public, and it always will. When you open up a newspaper and see a photograph, that

single image could tell you all you need to know about the story. Just the act of pressing the shutter at exactly the right time can reveal a whole narrative to the viewer. That is the true power of photography.'

**AGENCY WORK**

It may sound odd, but it could be said that press photography – in fact, all documentary imagery – is a kind of cannibal. It's a genre that devours and employs all other forms of still imagery. Looking through Leon's work, that point is made clear through the presence of landscape and portraiture, often within the same image.

'Press photography demands that you have an awareness and understanding of all forms of photography,' Leon explains. 'It's a case of being a jack of all trades. You have to be amply prepared for whatever the agency or newspaper throws at you. There are days when you'll be covering a story that relies on a single portrait. Then there are times when you are in a place like a museum and you are trying to decide the best way to tastefully light a still-life image. It's a very demanding job in that sense. You need to be able to think at a moment's notice.'

Leon suggests that being able to draw

**Above: One of Leon's shots from Libya, an assignment he describes as being entirely out of his comfort zone**

**Right: The 2010 winter Olympics in Canada – one of the rare occasions when Leon had a chance to research and prepare**

**'Just the act of pressing the shutter at exactly the right time can reveal a whole narrative to the viewer'**



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on your own experience is a crucial way of building confidence when out shooting. 'The first few times you go out on a shoot are obviously nerve-racking,' he says. 'But once you have a little experience under your belt you begin to understand how certain circumstances lead to particular results. Certain recurring themes will work with certain styles. You're essentially able to look back at your own work and use it as a template. But that's not to say that I'm not still finding myself in new situations. I recently spent some in Libya doing conflict photography [see left], which was my first experience in that kind of event. I had no reference point to work from. I had never worked under fire before so I was absolutely out of my comfort zone. It was the first time

in a number of years that I felt tested with regards to operating my equipment in an alien condition. Even so, I still had to be able to stay calm and think on my feet, which is true of any high-pressure situation.'

Closer to home, the high-pressure situations that Leon finds himself in are more to do with sharing an event space with many other photographers.

'It's fair to say you also need to keep a cool head when you're jostling for space among hundreds of other photographers at an event like a royal engagement or photographing on the red carpet,' he says. 'However, I think it's important to note that there's perhaps an unfair perception of how photographers at these events treat each other. A lot of the time if photographers know each other then they'll look out for one another. I was at a Fashion Week recently and during an event like that you'll see groups of photographers sitting together, chatting and generally looking out for each other. At the end of the day everyone's in the same boat, but obviously there are the odd occasions when you've got to stand your ground and assert yourself. Those moments of tension and stress are what keep the job interesting, though.'

As he works for a press photography agency, Leon can often find himself shooting a wide range of subjects. Faced with such a diverse range of assignments and locations, then, it would be logical to assume that research plays a large part in his preparations for a job.

'My job is not really any different to any photographer working on a regional newspaper,' he explains. 'Sometimes you'll have jobs that come up at the same time every year and you have to work out a way to shoot them from a fresh angle. It's not quite the jet-setting lifestyle that people probably imagine, where you're flying around the world at a moment's notice. That does occasionally happen, but often it can be things



like making your way to the Christie's salesroom to photograph a painting that's going to auction. Something like that doesn't require the greatest amount of preparation.'

On the other hand, Leon can find himself taking on larger assignments such as the Winter Olympics (see image on page 23).

'When I covered the Olympic Games in Canada in 2010, I had a chance to do my research, look into the sports and get to understand who the athletes were,' he says. 'It's a case of being prepared. Sport is a good example for me because I don't particularly follow sport. When I am occasionally sent to cover sporting events it requires a little more effort. If I were sent to cover a football match, I'd just be shooting some pictures of a couple of guys kicking a ball around, whereas someone who had experience and an understanding of the sport would know exactly who these players were, who had a grudge against who, and would know the physicality of the sport.'

It's often been said that press photographers and wildlife photographers are almost similar in their approach to their subject. While the situations both these camps face are unpredictable, a level of understanding with regard to behaviour and environment is crucial.

'I have a great many friends who, as well as being press photographers, are also keen nature photographers,' says Leon. 'In many ways they're two interchangeable genres. They both involve knowing your subject, knowing your environment and having a

great deal of patience waiting for a subject to show itself on the scene. There's a great level of satisfaction with both.'

**VISUAL STYLE**

One of the main reasons that Leon decided to forge a career under Agence France-Presse was because of the company's policy that their photographers should

**Above: Leon's shot taken at the Pope's open-air mass in Glasgow, 2010**

**Below: An example of Leon's unconventional use of composition**

always strive to get shots that are different from the norm.

'AFP encourages you to produce something that stands out from the crowd,' says Leon. 'They don't always want to see the clean and straight images that you can find in any old newspaper. You have to be careful, though, because sometimes that's exactly what the paper is looking for. It's



always worth taking that risk, though. At the end of the day these are the pictures that you're going to become known for.'

A good example of Leon producing an image that stands out from the crowd is his 2010 image of the Pope's open-air mass in Glasgow (see above left).

'With an image like that, I had the time to run around and get a good feel for the place,' he says. 'I could get some straight shots and make sure I had those in the can before attempting to try something different. Here I was able to exploit the light, shapes and colours to achieve something that would stand out from the other conventional shots.'

Attempting to find something a little quirky in the image is about as close as Leon can get to pinning down a consistent visual style within his work.

'I'm not too sure that I have a style where people can look at an image and say that it's without a doubt a Leon Neal image,' he says. 'That said, there are a handful of people, such as my girlfriend, who can look at an image and know it's mine. I'm not sure how, but obviously there's something there. The worry is that as soon as I identify it, I'll lose it.'

'When I was working at *The Times* they had a set style for the images,' he adds. 'Everything had to be a certain shape because they knew how the images would work on a page. That required me to shoot in that style. It's the opposite for me now. I have to be aware of the fact that my images could be used in a variety of places so I have to make sure that I have a good spread of pictures that can work across a wide range of publications.'

**EQUIPMENT**

Finding himself in such a variety of situations, Leon uses a multitude of cameras and lenses.

'AFP exclusively uses Nikon cameras,' he explains. 'I use a combination of the D3, D3S and occasionally the D700. Lens-wise, everything from a 14-24mm to a 600mm. It's a wide arsenal of gear because you never know what you're going to be shooting. For example, when I was shooting the Brit Awards, I was glued to the 600mm. But then, tomorrow I could be off somewhere in a press scrum and wielding a 14-24mm. You have to be prepared for everything. If I had to pick one all-round lens that I would keep with me at all times, it would be the Nikon 50mm f/1.4. It is great for something like street photography, and it's a size and length that I'm used to. It is also a fast lens so there's no need for a flash. It's a real "get out of jail free" lens. Thank goodness I don't have to pay for all this equipment.'

If pushed, Leon would pick the Nikon D3S as the camera that he favours most. 'The quality of the images that the D3S produces is incredible,' he says. 'I shoot raw all the time, so it's perfect. I shoot video as well. I produce web clips that aren't broadcast quality, but are perfect for embedding on web-based AFP news reports. I am very much looking forward to the D4 and seeing how that can handle video. It's pretty exciting.'

**Above: Leon's ethical stance comes into play when dealing with sensitive subjects, such as the residents of Dale Farm**

**Below: The interplay between subject and environment**

**ETHICAL STANCE**

One of the most important things that a press photographer should possess is not a good camera or lens – it is a strong ethical grounding.

'I think it's fair to say that there's a vast grey area in press photography and the media in general concerning what you can and can't do,' says Leon. 'For starters, photo manipulation is one of the biggest sins. The only manipulation that you can get away with is basic darkroom techniques, such as adjusting the levels slightly to create a more

balanced exposure. However, there are some agencies where they demand that you send in the file completely untouched – no colour correction, no sharpening.'

Outside of image manipulation, the way a press photographer behaves is the next major ethical issue.

'The way you go about getting your picture is something that every photographer has to consider,' Leon explains. 'I think anyone with a decent head on their shoulders will understand when to take a photo and when to put their camera away. The important thing is to ensure that the person being photographed isn't being fooled or exploited in any way. You must make sure that your motivations for taking an image are sincere and that you haven't set out to make someone appear foolish or portray them in a deceptive light.'

Leon's thoughts on the ethics of press photography lead on to how the public's perceptions of it have shifted over recent years.

'There have been concerns recently, largely due to the Leveson Inquiry, that all photographers and journalists are being bundled into the same group,' he says. 'Press photography' and 'paparazzi' are two terms that are becoming increasingly interchangeable. That's the big issue at the moment. When I'm in a public place with a camera over my shoulder, I often find people will approach me and ask me who I am waiting for, at which point I have to tell them that I'm not a paparazzi photographer. Unfortunately, that kind of photography is a large part of the public's perception of press imagery. They think we all go around chasing celebrities all day. It seems strange that these people will consume all these images, yet at the same time seem to hate the photographers that do it. It's a strange contradiction.' **AP**

To see more of Leon's work, visit [www.leonneal.com/blog](http://www.leonneal.com/blog), or follow him on Twitter at [@tabascokid](https://twitter.com/tabascokid)

