



The "third world" what is exactly the "third world" and one might add, where is it located. We

know that sometimes it can be found right in the midst of what are called "first world" cities and at other moments it represents large sectors of the economy in developing nations. The term of "developing nation" somehow implies that there exists a common denominator in this "development", when in fact we know that some sectors are as "advanced" as those in the industrialized world, while others are incipient in their economic growth. In fact there are no common denominators at all, in this so called development. There are no neat maps that establish where the "third" and "first" world realities start and end. At best there are approximations.

As we move forward in this digital era, and as communications such as the internet take center stage, economic issues become central to our understanding of what we are trying to accomplish. Photography is right there in the midst of all these questions. But let us look at photography within the larger picture. If you are reading this you already belong to that sector of people considered as the "first world", no matter from where you are coming from.

Last week the financial markets around the world found themselves in a nose dive, where far and near had absolutely no relation to what was happening. While the markets in Hong-Kong, Malaysia, Thailand, Philippines and South Korea had underlying reasons for such a turn of events, the repercussion did not stop at their doorsteps. Today all financial markets interconnected as they are by television news brought on by the likes of CNN or MSNBC, the internet, or any of the professional financial information networks. All this caused an instant world reaction.

If we ever needed proof of how news are today a global and instant affair, we have to go no further than to observe what happened around the death of Princess Diana, or what happened to the financial markets during their collapse in Asia.

The reactions have been instantaneous all over, there was no "third" or "first world" difference in the speed of such events. This ought to tell us something with regard to the digital revolution.

But let us be clear, the fact that there was this world wide response to the news, does not suggest that all the people touched by such events actually participated in their consumption. Even though they will all suffer -in the case of the market declines- as a result of these occurrences, many have not even a clue of what has transpired. We are living in a period where the people live not only in different time zones, but in different time realities within those time zones.

Some live in the digital era, and then the majority live ignoring it's existence -willingly or not-, even though their destiny is being profoundly influenced by it. One can not extricate oneself from the digital era by wishing it away, any more than one could ignore the reality of the "cold war". The ripple effect of it sheer existence touched every human being no matter how distant they felt themselves to be from any direct involvement. I am thinking of a family of campesinos in Nicaragua; what did they know of the cold war, yet no one would doubt that they were caught in the literal cross fire of such a war.

At ZoneZero we are reaching more people and from all over the world in ways which would have been unthinkable only a few years ago. In the span of only 24 months we have gone the equivalent of having silent movies become spoken ones. An effort that took the movie industry decades to achieve was accomplished on the internet in only two years.

With so many events transforming society at such great speed, one has to be cautious and observe how easy it is to be overtaken by events and left behind without understanding what has happened.

In the field of photography this is particularly true. Much as in the Asian financial markets, the market for photojournalistic imagery has seen a steady decline. In the advertising field, photographers who do not have the needed technology to produce digital imagery (altered or not) are increasingly losing clients. Teachers who do not have the needed knowledge in digital photography are finding it harder and harder to keep their positions, as students demand from their schools, to be taught all these new technologies. The ten thousand people at Kodak who have just been fired are yet another testimony that no one is immune to the changing realities brought about by the digital revolution. Not even Kodak.

The price of digital cameras have come down rapidly and the quality has increased with each new generation. Computers cost less and less with increasingly higher performance ratios. Low cost printers being able to produce photographic quality prints was something that did not exist a scant five years ago. Film will be replaced with little cards (PCMCIA cards) the size of credit cards which will make the cost of film an almost irrelevant issue. Video cameras that will offer interchangeable options of moving and still imagery at high enough quality to become of serious use are already here. Still pictures that can be panned 360° making the point of view of the photographer a moot issue. All of this and much more is what the digital era has in store for us.

Let us not forget that economic factors are driving all these transformations affecting the world of photography. These same issues are also driving many of the cultural transformations of how and where photography can and will be used.

Imagine the difference in a poor neighborhood school teaching students about photography where traditional film has been replaced with digital cameras whose cost of film is zero. Not a small issue I would think. Imagine such students publishing their pictures on the internet and sharing it with the rest of the world. That is a real and practical possibility today. Consider the implications from the point of view of self esteem for such a youngster. How will all of this make a difference for a child when he or she grows up in this new digital era"

I am reminded of a letter John Berger wrote in Le Monde to Subcomandante Marcos in the jungle of Chiapas, Mexico. There he quotes himself:

"In a letter written in prison in 1931, Antonio Gramsci told a story to his two sons, the younger one whom he would never be able to meet, due to his confinement. A little boy has gone to sleep with a glass of milk on the floor next to his bed. A mouse drinks the milk. Upon waking the child sees the empty glass and starts to cry. So the mouse goes to the goat and asks for a little milk. The goat doesn't have any milk, it needs grass. The mouse goes to the field and there is no grass due to the draught. The mouse goes to the well but the well doesn't have water because it needs to be repaired. So the mouse goes to visit the mason but he doesn't have the needed stones to make the repairs. Then the mouse goes to the mountain and the mountain doesn't want to hear about anything, it appears like a skeleton since it has lost all it's trees. In exchange for some stones, the mouse tells the mountain, the child when it grows up will plant some oak and pine trees on your mountain side. The mountain agrees and gives all the needed stones. Later the child had so much milk that it bathed in it. Later as he became a man he continued to plant trees, now they hold back the erosion and the land has become fertile."

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