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NEWS

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Pictures from Japan

Phil Coomes | 09:15 UK time, Monday, 28 March 2011



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The [earthquake that hit Japan on 11 March](#) and the powerful tsunami it triggered is now known to have killed more than 10,000 people, with more than 17,000 still missing. Add to that nearly 200,000 people who are living in temporary shelters, then this is a tragedy on a massive scale. Lives will remain uprooted for many years, and the loss of loved ones and communities is something that may never be re-built. On top of this there is the continuing threat of a major radiation leak at the [Fukushima nuclear plant](#).

For photographers the immediate aftermath provided shocking images of widespread destruction on a scale that is hard to imagine, with [satellite photographs](#) perhaps being the only real way to try and grasp the enormity of it.

Now, however, there is a need to tell the stories of those who escaped, who survived and are struggling to figure out what to do next.

Photographer Jake Price has sent this report from Tokyo having returned from a trip to affected areas in the north of the country, primarily around Sendai.

He said:

"As I boarded the plane in Tokyo bound for Yamagata in northern Japan the note on the lounge screen remarked that the plane might be returned to Tokyo because of snow. Despite the warning I boarded and headed north. About an hour later the plane started its descent. Visibility was next to nothing, but the plane pushed on, emblematic I thought of how the Japanese handled this most horrid of catastrophes I was descending into. "Once on the ground I could not rent a car due to rationing of gasoline. With no other option I traveled by bus, changing three times, to reach the tsunami zone, west of Yamagata.



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About this blog



I'm Phil Coomes, picture editor and photographer for the BBC News website. [This is my blog](#) where I'll be

exploring the world of photojournalism, photos in the news and BBC News' use of photographs, including those by our readers.

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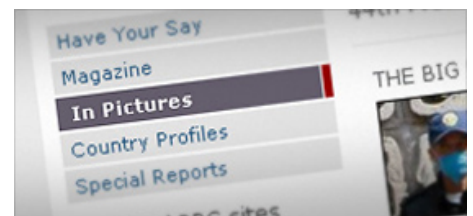
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"In Yamagata, after wandering the snowy streets for a couple of hours I came upon the Hotel New Marble that had a room. The following morning I met a women named Kobayashi from Miyagi who had lost everything and was put up in the hotel by her company. She told me the thing she remembered most from the day was: 'The water that engulfed us was totally black, as if it was another substance all together. To escape it I climbed to the fourth story of an adjacent building, but the blackness kept coming. Finally it abated, but in my memory sometimes it continues to climb.' She shook while she spoke. I was the first one, outside of her husband whom she spoke with. 'Just to tell someone is a great relief.' She and her husband were staying in the hotel for one more night.



© Jake Price

"Six hours, two buses and two more taxis later I arrived in Tagajo, a small industrial town adjacent to Sendai. I arrived late in the afternoon. As dusk fell it was evident that there was no place to sleep when I came to a centre for the displaced. I asked if I could rest there and was given a small space to stay amongst the hundreds of others that now call the gymnasium home. In total 1,300 people lived on the school grounds. I slept there for two nights.

"I cannot say that I lived as they did because I do not have the weight of loss hanging over me, or the precariousness of the future to occupy my thoughts. But, by living there, at least I could understand the conditions that people lived in. You can tell a lot about the state of people at four in the morning when the night is at its darkest and time moves the slowest.



© Jake Price

"At the back of the gymnasium a young boy violently howled with a raspy cry. Inconsolable at first, he was gradually placated and fell back to sleep. Nearest me were mainly the elderly.

"As I walked the streets the next morning I was struck by the small things that people did to order their lives. A relentless sense of order prevailed over the destruction. In front of homes, magazines and books were neatly wrapped for disposal, along with furniture, clothing and other household items all neatly grouped together.

"On the larger scale some factory workers had already returned to their workplaces and started working on small things such as sweeping the grounds to keep them tidy in preparation for the day when the heavy equipment would start to do the substantial work. In all, these small efforts contribute to the whole which will get life moving again. Much has been said about Japanese stoicism, but I don't see people as merely stoic. There's also a lot of hope here. If there is hope it is because of a pragmatic approach to life which leads to a future worth living."

Here a few pictures of Jake's from Sendai

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Update 11 April 2011: Jake Price has narrated an audio slideshow which you can now view on the BBC.

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Comments

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1. At 20:52 29th Mar 2011, **Sanji-san** wrote:

Feel guilty just appreciating the artistic beauty of the photos due to the darkness in them.

Hope you can return in a few weeks with another collection, this time showing a much happier tone and signifying Japanese resilience.

[complain about this comment](#)

2. At 21:12 29th Mar 2011, **Seanlookalike** wrote:

I'm sorry but I don't think B&W photos should be taken of this catastrophe - whilst it may emphasise the tragedy of the situation I personally think we should avoid the 'artistic' view of this nightmare unfolding before us.

[complain about this comment](#)

3. At 21:43 29th Mar 2011, **adultgoods** wrote:

B&W allows the photographer to show real emotion. Surrounded as we are with 24/7 constant streaming media 'comment', its these photographs that will stand the test of time, and help to record such a momentous event in history. I believe its better to have an artistic emotional view of tragedy than a colour snapshot that is so superficial and forgotten in monents.

[complain about this comment](#)

4. At 21:50 29th Mar 2011, **WilcoJohnson** wrote:

Strange, how monochrome can give a clearer impression than colour of some situations, I appreciate the oppressive, otherness of these pictures in conveying the scale of the disaster.

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5. At [22:29](#) 29th Mar 2011, **M E Walker** wrote:

I must argue against Seanlookalike's comment.

The many news reports on this tragedy have shown in video-graphic voyeuristic detail the Tsunami, earthquake and aftermath with the cold precision of mobile phone cameras. Jake Price's work has captured the human feelings of this trauma allowing the viewer to empathise with those suffering.

Jake's work is art, because it makes you feel. What is wrong in being 'artistic' to make viewers feel?

Who would not feel even a slight twinge at the "Napalm Girl" picture today?

Why did my mother have to turn away from the Auschwitz museum when she saw the children's shoes?

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6. At [22:34](#) 29th Mar 2011, **Jon McGovern** wrote:

Black-and-white images are not inherently more 'artistic' than those in colour. That's just silly.

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7. At [23:56](#) 29th Mar 2011, **dreambloomer** wrote:

I don't think it matters much whether the images are mono or colour, as long as they are good, well-crafted images. I don't think any of these are particularly good, and underexposing the prints in mono to give them a more dramatic look doesn't change this.

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8. At [00:01](#) 30th Mar 2011, **robert** wrote:

Being a photographer I actually find these shots too dark. That of course might not be the photographers fault. Also Black and White photography is in itself not 'arty'.

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9. At [00:16](#) 30th Mar 2011, **Graphis** wrote:

What motivates a photographer to record human suffering? There are many beautiful sights in Japan that would make equally good photographs, instead of pictures of the loss and destruction.

These pictures make me feel very morally ambiguous: while it can be argued that a news team that is reporting an incident are just doing their job, when it comes to freelance photographers that descend like vultures, and who will benefit (either financially, or from acquiring a portfolio that leads to other commissions) from other's misfortune, is it right that we applaud their work as "art"?

Do we even need to record such events in an "artistic" manner at all? Does doing that somehow remove us from really feeling empathy with the victims?

Why do you need art to "feel"? Weren't the news pictures bad enough?

We don't see in B&W, we see in colour. B&W is thus yet one more step away from reality, from being there, from feeling.

It doesn't matter how well-taken these photographs are, they still leave a rather sour taste in my mouth. And a sadness in my heart, that others always seek to profit from misery.

[complain about this comment](#)

10. At 00:59 30th Mar 2011, **Lividov** wrote:

B&W is supposed to allow you to focus on the detail and content of the image. These are just too dark to appreciate anything. I think they are poor for a professional.

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11. At 01:41 30th Mar 2011, **DanielV** wrote:

How do we define photography as a profession? Photography can be interpreted in many ways just the same as paintings and drawings. For most of the folks commenting here there were feelings created by the images however small or large. So to be honest Jake has given us something we never had before - memories of the tragedy in Japan from a different point of view.

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12. At 03:38 30th Mar 2011, **Peter Martin** wrote:

I agree that these pictures are upsetting. But they also draw attention to the tragedy and provide a moving record. I too hope that we will see pictures that show a more cheerful side but appreciate both the art and the suffering shown here. Excellent.

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13. At 06:08 30th Mar 2011, **Italo C - Montreal - Canada** wrote:

B&W is the purest form of journalistic and documentary photography. It allows us to see straight through to the heart of the matter. I'd like to thank Mr. Price for documenting this tragedy so we may never forget.

[complain about this comment](#)

14. At 13:55 30th Mar 2011, **peteherb** wrote:

"When you photograph people in colour you photograph their clothes. But when you photograph people in B&W, you photograph their souls!" ~Ted Grant.

I agree a little with Robert, in that I find these a little too dark. However I still think they hold a great value and power.
Just because an image is in monochrome, doesn't mean it should instantly be read as "arty". I think that's a huge misconception.
And perhaps with this Ted Grant quote in mind, capturing the tragedy in black & white may enable the photographer to capture the heart and soul of Japan at this time, too?

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15. At 14:45 30th Mar 2011, **David_Kilpatrick** wrote:

I also find these images very poor. Good B&W can be incredibly atmospheric --- see www.shorpy.com most days. But these images fail to convey very much at all. As others have said, they're so murky and underexposed that its difficult to make out much of what's happening. If we weren't told that they had been taken after a devastating tsunami in the middle of a bitter Japanese Winter, I'd have said they were shot in a corner of a Californian scrap yard.

I've looked long and hard but these images convey nothing of the tragedy and contain no beauty either.

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16. At 15:00 30th Mar 2011, **Myshkin7** wrote:

It seems like the forest is being lost for the trees, as we debate the artistic validity of B&W photography. These photographs are simply one Western photo-journalist's perspective on a large-scale disaster and the ongoing affects on the Japanese civilians - their resiliency, their emotional confusion, their ability to cope and make sense of their

world now, post-disaster. To Judge the art is almost funny; if you're judging the art, you're missing the point.

[complain about this comment](#)

17. At 19:23 5th Apr 2011, **Saitama_1** wrote:

I don't think these images are particularly good. Nothing against the photographer, but parachute journalism quite often yields ordinary results.
Having said that, the western media have largely ignored the fallout from the quake so it is important that people are there to tell the story regardless.

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