

Containing the Flood

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English 357

Photo Essay Analysis

The flood of 2009 was unquestionably the worst natural disaster to hit the Red River Valley in the last one hundred years. It was a time of sadness for many families, having to vacate their homes because of the high water. However, for the city of Fargo, the response to this major event showed immense amounts of effort and resiliency from citizens and city officials. This photo essay, which can be found at http://www.boston.com/bigpicture/2009/03/red_river_flooding.html, was taken during the days leading up to the projected crest in late March of 2009. It consists of 30 photos taken by 12 different photographers. The images range from aerial photos, to photos of volunteers helping with the fight, to images of the vast landscape as a backdrop to a dramatic scene. It did a great job at capturing the mood and urgency of the situation.

Formal Analysis.

The photos of this essay are initially introduced by a paragraph framing the situation that led to the images. Each image is accompanied by a caption containing the location of the photo, the date it was taken, background text, and the name of the photographer. According to McCloud, I would say that the words act in an additive fashion to the pictures (McCloud, 154). Without them, the pictures could still tell a very similar story than they already do. If you were familiar with the area, the viewer might even be able to tell when and where they were taken, considering that they know about the recent history of the area. The words, however, add to the story, and provide specificity on time, place, and story, clearing up any questions that the viewer might have from strictly looking at the images.

This particular essay arranges photos in an aspect-to-aspect manner, which “sets a wandering eye on different aspects of a place, idea, or mood” (McCloud, 73). In this essay, they focus is on the event, and the place and mood are included as part of that story. All of the images are based around the 2009 flooding of the Red River and how it affected the Red River Valley. Most of the images come from the Fargo/Moorhead community, but some are taken in other places. For example, image 12 is taken of the Missouri River north of Bismarck, which is about 200 miles from Fargo. The image helps strengthen the story that the overall essay is trying to get at: that many different conditions, including swollen and ice-jammed surrounding rivers led to this major flood. The aspect-to-aspect approach is a very strong one for this essay and works really well. The viewer is provided with many different images or aspects of the flood fight from that year, whether it is filling up sandbags in the Fargodome, like in image 3, or sandbagging around someone’s house, like in image 24. All of the images pertain to the same event and the exact location isn’t extremely important, but it’s nice to know.

Many different photo elements are utilized in the selected images. With the flat landscape of the place, it is inevitable that the horizon line will get included on many of the pictures taken, and in this essay it is visible in more than half of the exterior shots. The overall feeling of the essay is dreary and sad, yet urgent. The colors of all the images are consistent and are a major reason for the feeling of the overall essay. In every photo where natural light is the main source of light, the quality is gray because of overcast skies. Here are some of the individual images from the essay how they pertain to concepts spoken of in Complete Photography:



Image 1. The horizon line is very apparent in this photo. It hangs in the top third of the photo and provides a layering effect between the dog, house, and trees. The dog stands out in the gray picture as a colorful focal point. The dike and height of the water allows the photographer an interesting point of view looking at the roof of the house from above. The source of light for this image is a gray and gloomy natural light cast from the overcast sky.



Image 2. The horizon line is again a very large part of the photo as well as layering. The front of the photo is quite interesting but the action in the background is an unavoidable part of the image. From where the image is taken, it is also hard not to get an idea of what the snow might feel like, from the way it covers the branches in the foreground, demonstrating the texture principle.



Image 3. This photo, like the second one, is quite different than the first in that there is plenty to look at. This picture demonstrates the rule of thirds quite effectively. The people seem to be a major subject in the image but only take up the right and bottom two-thirds of the image. The point of view from which the photo was taken demonstrates scale of the large open space in the Fargodome, and provides a better view of all the different colors worn by the volunteers, giving it a more interesting color palette. The light for this image is one of the two from the essay that features exclusively artificial light.



Image 4. Leading lines from the dikes draw the eye from the bottom right of the image to the left side of the image, passing volunteers and workers putting the dike together. The source of light in this image is natural light, and is again a gray, dreary light from the overcast sky.



Image 5. The bright yellow John Deere is the first thing that draws in your eye to this image. In the bucket of the tractor, a few other bright colors are noticeable, while the surrounding parts of the image consist only of different shades of grays and browns. The image is layered with the John Deere, back to the house, and back to the yard that extends beyond the house.



Image 6. This image is dominated by the rule of the thirds and has a flash of color from the orange uniform peeking out the side of the vehicle. The way that the landscape and horizon line looks, the image has a very static quality to it, but from looking in the background you can see that the motor in back is moving and propelling the vehicle and the snow is being thrown up from the wind that the vehicle is making.



Image 7. This is the second image that seems to be off balance between chaotic scenery and simplicity. The right two thirds of the image is cluttered with people, sandbags, and pine trees, while on the other side of the bags it is simply the snow and the bottoms of a few trees towards the top of the image.



Image 8. This is the image with the most variation within the whole collection. The photo is taken from a point of view that many people don't get to see, especially in a situation like this. The horizon line gets a little lost but is still visible in the image, near the top of the photo.

In my opinion, this photo essay is a very strong one in many ways. Graphically, the images are very well done, each one as an individual and also as a whole. Even though all of the images were split up between twelve different photographers, it all feels cohesive. Here are some of the reasons why I think it's still very cohesive: for one, with the essay being set up in an aspect-to-aspect format, it invites whomever puts together the essay to include many different types of images, from close-ups to aerial views. Another reason why this essay feels so cohesive is again, the lighting and the consistent feeling of sadness and dreariness. And that brings me to my third major part of this essay, the mood.

Content Analysis.

I was a senior in high school at Fargo South High in 2009 and I was one of the tens of thousands of people that helped fight this flood. The thing that I appreciate most about this essay is the variety of emotions that you get from these different images. All of the images work very well in capturing the overall mood of those very odd days leading up to the ominous crest prediction. Here are some examples of this and why I think they are successful:



Image 5. This was a very normal thing to see during that week, people being together and smiling. It is an odd thing to think about, but amidst all the chaos and anxiousness, there was a real feeling of camaraderie with most everyone that helped out.



Image 10. This image rings true with the idea that people weren't waiting around to be helped by others or delivered filled sandbags from the city, they took it upon themselves to fill the sandbags as quickly as possible and surround their homes. Also, notice that the kids are even helping.



Image 8. This areal view, showing the vast amounts of water and ice, makes it look like a miracle would need to happen in order to save the area from major damage.



Image 26. After seeing an image like this and how close the water is to the top of the sandbags, it is hard to think that the family would have much success in saving their home. It is a selection that shows both resiliency and maybe even some foolishness. It is a powerful image nonetheless.



Image 25. This image, of the evacuation of Elim Rehab & Care Center, shows the very real fact that many people were scared for what might happen to their city and in turn, their home and life.



Image 27. But for me, this image says it all. Through all the terror and through all the anxiety, no one was ready to give up. They were too proud of home.

The way that this essay was arranged and photographed, the photographers clearly knew that they were witnessing a major event in this area's history. Every single photo in this piece was taken with care and with the intention of telling a story, even though the end of that story was yet unknown. The last photo, for example, is an image that puts a face on the whole event. It is an image that could be put on the front page of the papers after a successful or not-so-successful fight,



something that can hit home: a child helping to save the city. It is an attempt to tell a story as it actually happened, but in a dramatic fashion. However, considering the circumstances of the situation, I believe drama is welcomed in telling this story.

The only editing that may have been done in this essay would be to highlight different focal points in the images, like the dog in the first picture and the American flag in image 27. In telling a story like this, it is best to keep the photo editing to a minimum; to keep the raw nature of a photo, almost as if it were an

action shot, moving just as fast as the subjects were moving in preparation for the flood.

For all the aspects that this essay includes, there are several that they do not. For one, the viewer is left wondering (if they aren't familiar with the area) what actually happened as a result of all this effort. There was plenty of time after the crest where the cities just hunkered down and waited for the waters to recede back into their banks. Another aspect of that was the cleanup and how much was lost. But depending on the time when the essay was released, those events may not have occurred yet and if they had, they might have deterred the viewer from the story that the photographers were trying to tell.

Conclusion.

The overall result was a powerfully emotional and successful photo essay. The images included in this essay were of a wide variety: in the amount of space the image captured, of mood, of situation, and of geographical location. From twelve different photographers, the essay read as though it was of one idea and clearly of one event. It captured the mood of the entire event almost perfectly and left the viewer with emotions that were both unresolved and hopeful.

Sources.

The Big Picture. (2009, March 27). *Red River flooding*. Retrieved from http://www.boston.com/bigpicture/2009/03/red_river_flooding.html

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