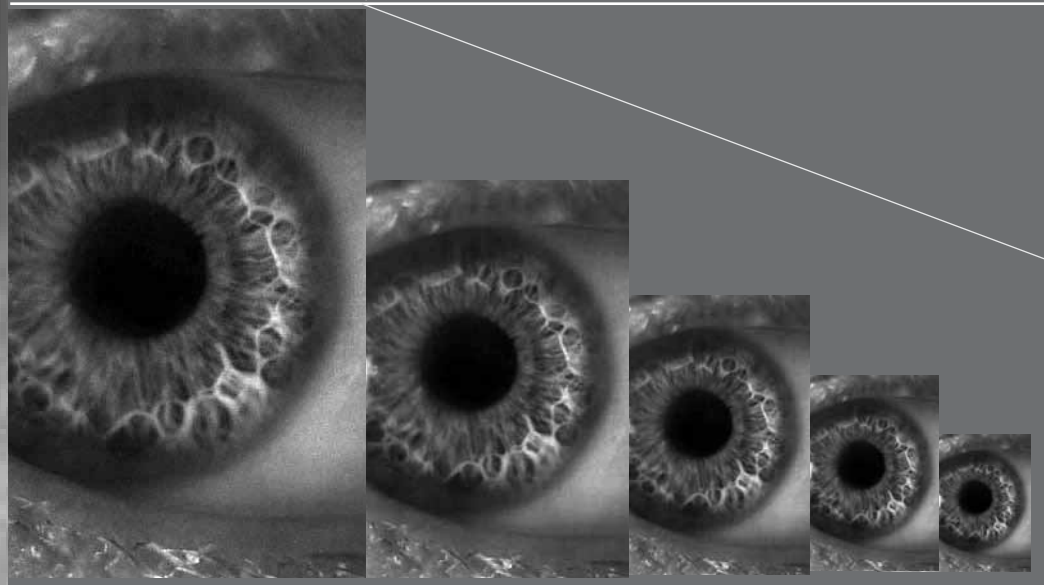
A ONE-EYED VIEW



Reg Morrison

A ONE-EYED VIEW

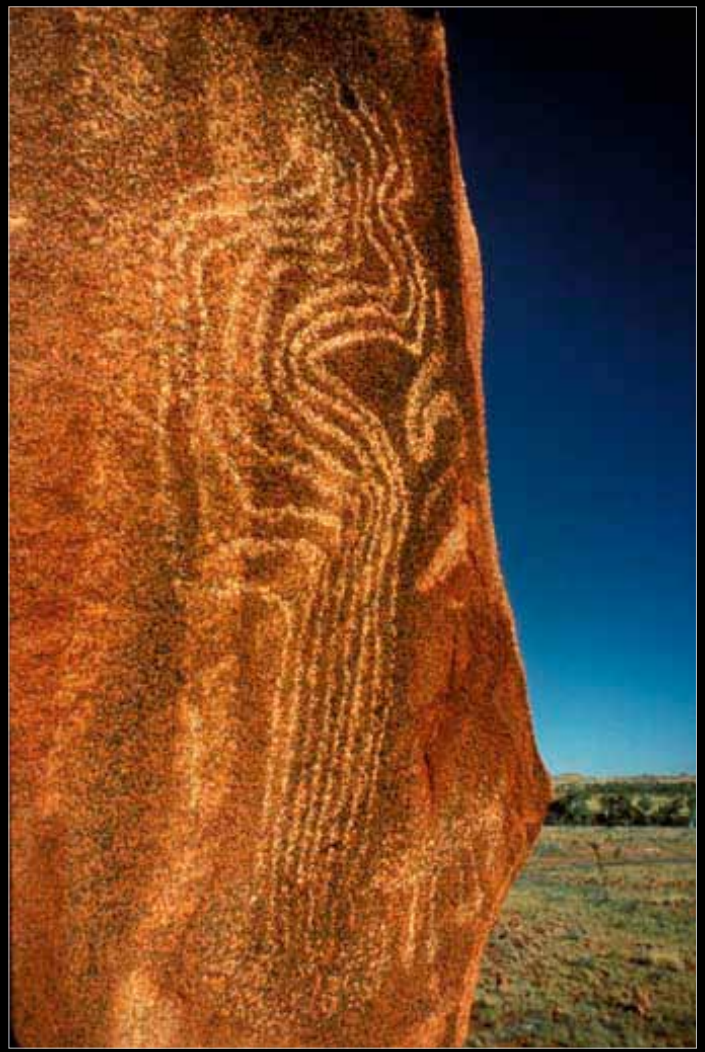
Photography is by far the greatest medium of graphic communication that our species has ever devised. Most wonderful of all, it was born with an umbilical link to the natural world: you could photograph only what you could see, and you had to be there. So some degree of documentary truth was unavoidable.

The other gift photography gave us was its inherently symbolic nature. Early photographs portrayed the world in monochrome. We see in colour. Therefore, to interpret the symbols of reality inherent in a black-and-white image, the viewer's perceptive right brain had to be switched on and fully engaged. This allowed a good black-and-white photograph to deliver far more 'significance' and 'meaning' than could any coloured image.

The girl had come to the exhibition with her mother and an older brother. All three stopped for a minute or so at the pictures of the pregnant woman and the newborn baby. Growing impatient, mother and brother finally moved on. But the girl remained, riveted by the pictures' implications. Her mother had to take her hand and lead her away to break the spell.

That rule about colour and monochrome remains valid today. If your primary photographic intent is to describe the external appearance of something, use colour. But if you want to convey 'significance' and communicate feelings or ideas and stir the viewers' emotions, then use the symbolism inherent in monochrome imagery.

Graphic communication began more than 30,000 years ago with a few symbolic images scratched on a rock-face or painted by a Neolithic finger dipped in wet ochre. The best preserved of these ancient messages are in Australia's north-west.



Petroglyphs on Mt Edgar Station, Pilbara, WA.

Petroglyphs at Gallery Hill, Pilbara, WA.

Preserved by tens of thousands of years of 'desert varnish' (a silica film that coats the rocks), the petroglyphs include depictions of flying possums, yams and turtles, telling of a time when this arid region was a well-watered woodland.

Like rock art, early black-and-white photographs also communicated via durable monochromatic symbols, but these messages were essentially factual, like visual quotes lifted directly from the reality of those times. Being both symbolic and documentary, early black and white photos therefore offered our species an entirely new form of communication, one that filled the journalistic role that art had previously attempted. But photographs did it with equal panache and far more accuracy.

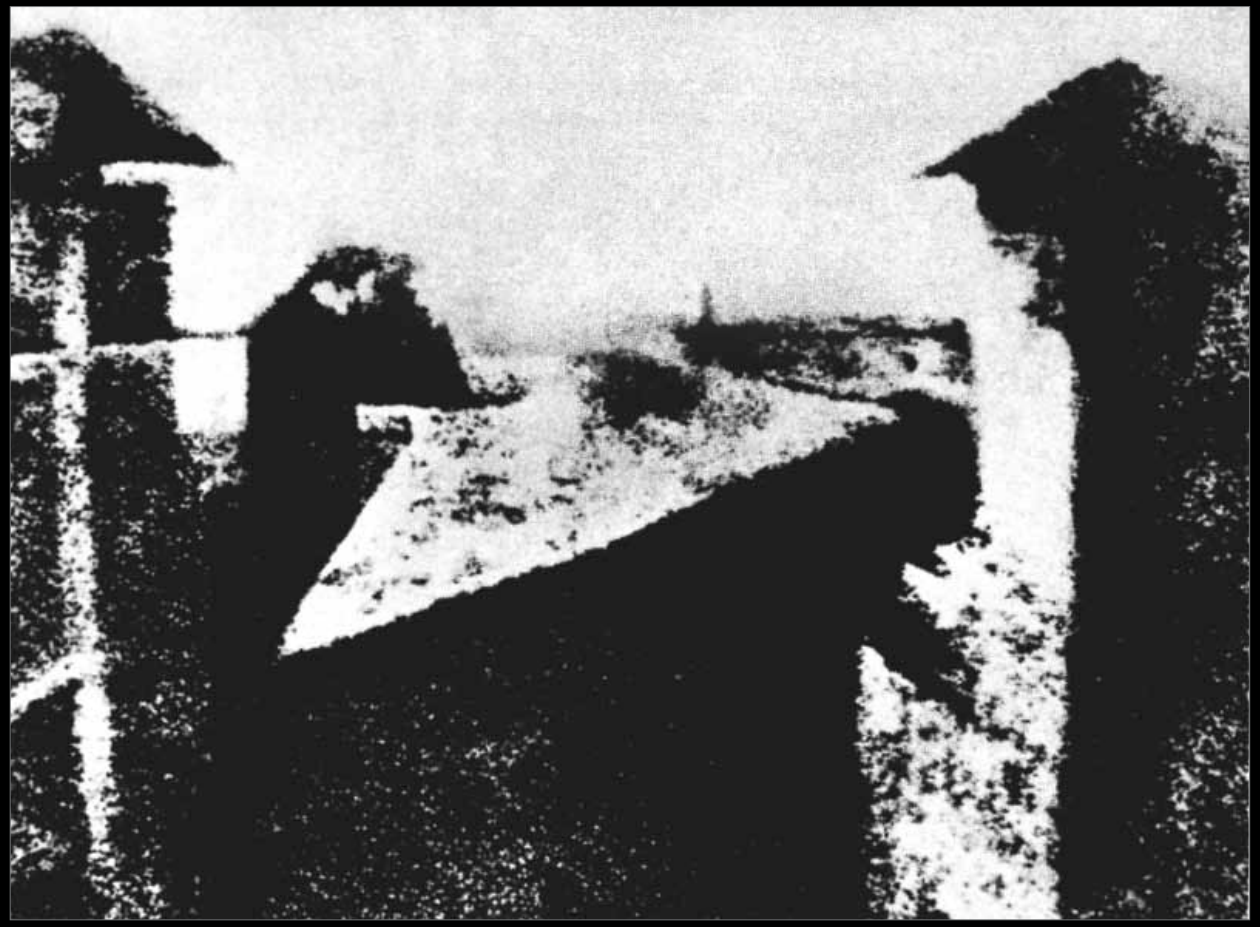
Here at last was a medium of communication "whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure." *

In this sense photography offered our species a wholly new language of unrivalled beauty, potency and relevance; and when newspapers and magazines began to publish half-tone images in the 1890s, photography blossomed.

In the heyday of photojournalism that followed, the camera enabled us for the very first time in history to see worlds we had never seen through eyes other than our own. This was no mere art, here was graphic communication in its most exquisite form.

* Hamlet, Act III, ii. William Shakespeare.

The world's first permanent photographic image was made in 1827 by Joseph Nicéphore Niépce. After years of experiment with light-sensitive materials he achieved success with a bitumenous coating on a copper plate. It took eight hours of exposure and a subject bathed in strong sunlight to record the poorly defined image, but it accurately depicted the general shape of the outbuildings that Niépce could see from an upstairs window at his home. The result was a very sketchy 'chalk and charcoal' affair, with little trace of mid-tones, but at least the picture was both accurate and permanent.



LEFT: This is the very first permanent photographic image made by Niépce from an upstairs window at his home.

BELOW: Among the first of his images to record any trace mid-tones was this photograph of a table setting.

Many early photographers felt that the medium they were pioneering should emulate other forms of communication and gain recognition as a form of 'Art'. Artists meanwhile felt threatened by photographers' ability to communicate aspects of the world around them with unparalleled precision. The result was that painters tried to move away from descriptive representations of their world, while photographers tried to adopt a 'painterly' approach to their subject matter. Both moves were disastrous.

Art had originated as a means of extending human communication into the visual arena, and the artists also tried to make that graphic communication permanent and transmissible from generation to generation. When photography drove artists to vacate their traditional role as the professional documenters of their culture—its iconic people, places, events and beliefs—it was inevitable that less 'arty' photographers would step in to fill the documentary void.

So as artists became introspective, abstractive and amateur, photographers began to reject the painterly approach and accept their natural role as the professional documenters of their culture. It meant that the Michelangelos, Rembrandts and Rodins of the future would all carry cameras and tripods rather than paint brushes and chisels.

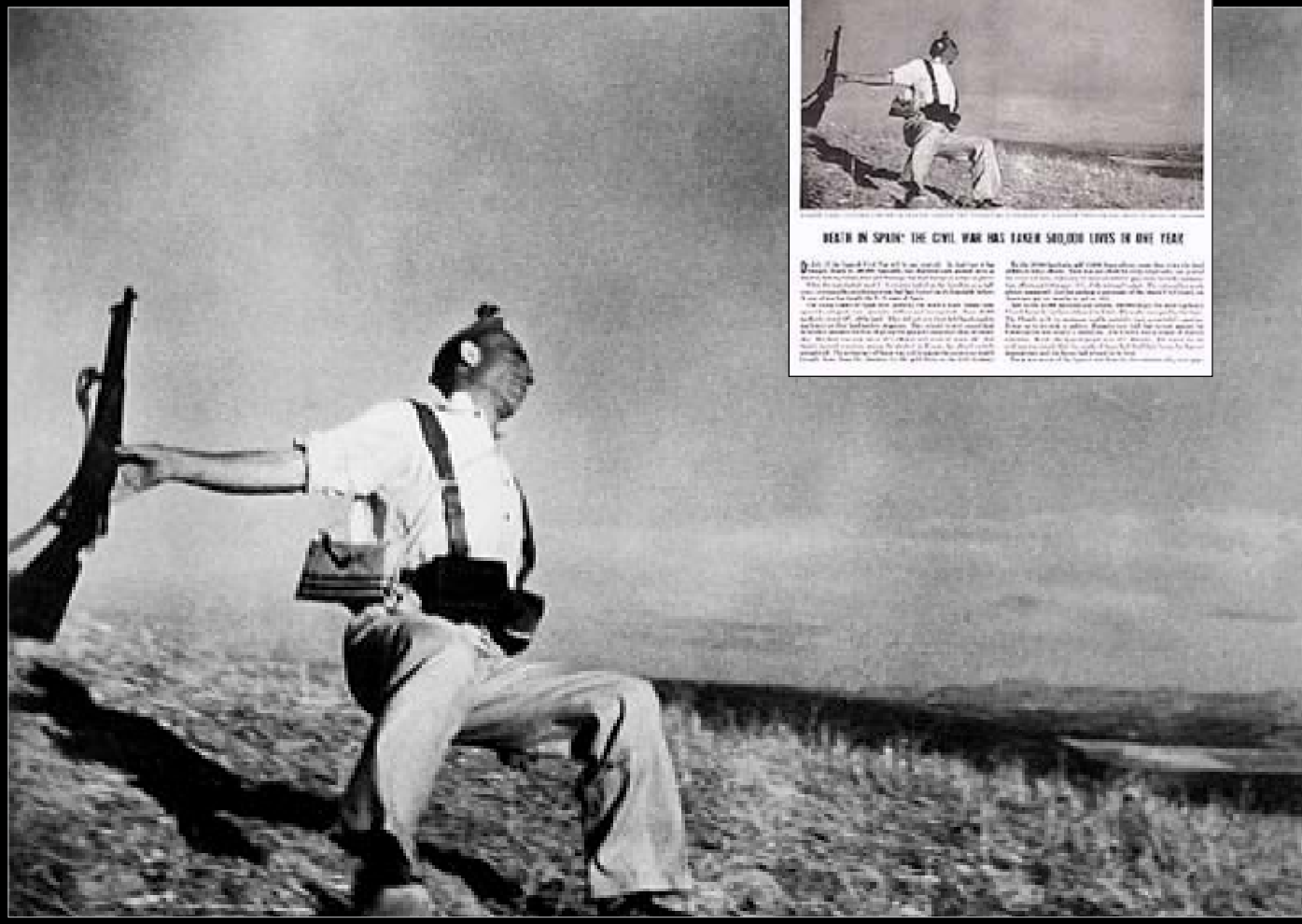
It was the beginning of a golden age of photojournalism.

The great photographs of that era are explicit expressions of the photographer's love affair with life. The more sensitive the photographer and the more intense the affair, the more elegant and meaningful were the photographic offspring of that passion.

THE AGE OF PHOTOJOURNALISM

The photojournalist's camera allowed us for the very first time to see people, places and events, in context, and with extraordinary clarity. It was as though we were there. And if the photographers happened to be among the masters of this new medium, their sensitivity, experience and very often, their great courage, produced images that allowed us to see our fast-changing world even more clearly than if we had been there ourselves.

A potent combination of fact and passion-loaded symbolism is the reason that the great black-and-white photos from the past live on, and why colour images are soon forgotten. It ensures that the distinction between monochrome and colour is like the distinction between love and lust—the latter, mundane; the former, sublime.



One of the world's best known images freezes the moment of death for a Loyalist soldier during the second Spanish Civil War. It was made in 1936 by war's most illustrious photographer, Robert Capa, and pictures like this became the standard fare of pictorial news magazines like LIFE. Photojournalism's golden age lasted until the 1970s.

The heyday of black-and-white photojournalism is long passed and most of its giants—people like Henri Cartier-Bresson, W. Eugene Smith, Bill Brandt, Carl Mydans, Dorothea Lange and Ansell Adams—are now dead. But their passion lives on in their pictures, and they in turn breathe life into photographic books and magazines all over the world. And occasionally, even into art galleries!

The tide of technology has rolled on, and the world of photographic images has never seemed so rich and colourful as it does today; but sadly, thanks to computers, photography's old umbilical link to the real world has finally been severed. The most bizarre figments of human imagination may now be conjured up in gaudy photographic detail without the author's fingers ever leaving the computer keyboard.

The result is a torrent of digitally manipulated imagery that intoxicates the senses with its imaginary drama and fake opulence. But this visual and emotional overload inevitably lowers our threshold of boredom and nurtures only apathy and detachment from 'dull reality'. Consequently, we become increasingly blind to the underlying message inherent in all good documentary images, and to monochrome pictures in particular.

This creeping blindness, like cataracts, leaves us immeasurably poorer.

A photographer and his models.

Photographs are able to illuminate, educate and redirect people's lives to a degree that no other graphic medium can match. They reinforce and validate memories, and nurture feelings of love and pleasure with a poignancy that lies beyond the reach of other forms of communication. Amid the wrack of a natural disaster, survivors prize photographs above all other rescued possessions. 'Things' can be replaced or recreated to some degree, but dead children, parents, friends and relatives cannot. Via photographs, they live on in the mind at least.

Absorbed by the personal significance inherent in their snapshots, these two visitors to an exhibition of news photographs were wholly unconscious of their surroundings.

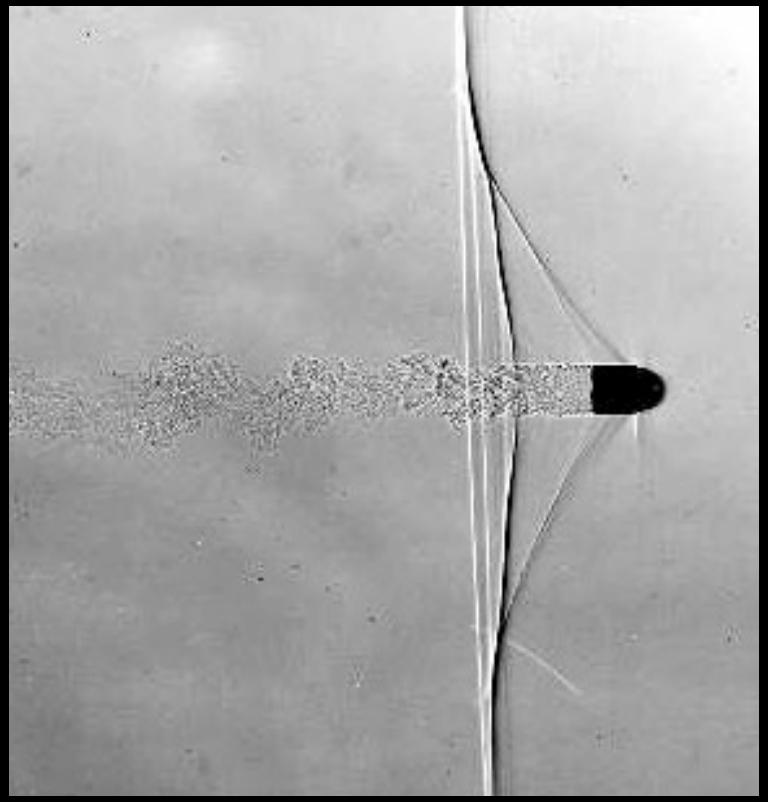
Everything you need at the touch of a button!

This very old picture of my daughter, accompanied by those shrewdly crafted words, was used in an international advertising campaign for Nikon cameras during 1993-94. The campaign was internationally successful because it touched the most primal genetic button in humanity's auto-response repertoire—the reproduction button embedded in the ancient mammal-reptile components at the core of the brain. This mechanism is on a permanent hair trigger and requires no conscious effort.

No other form of graphic communication can hope to achieve such an instant universal response.

The camera's ability to precisely document events has also made photography essential to all fields of modern science. It provides enduring evidence to support data, explain techniques, and verify or disprove research. The camera can go where we cannot—into the deepest ocean, inside the smallest bacterium, and far into space. Cameras can record motion that is either too fast or too slow for the human eye to discern—the opening of a flower or the passage of a bullet. In short, the elaborate edifice of our techno-culture has been midwifed by photography and now pivots on the camera.

VISION UNLIMITED



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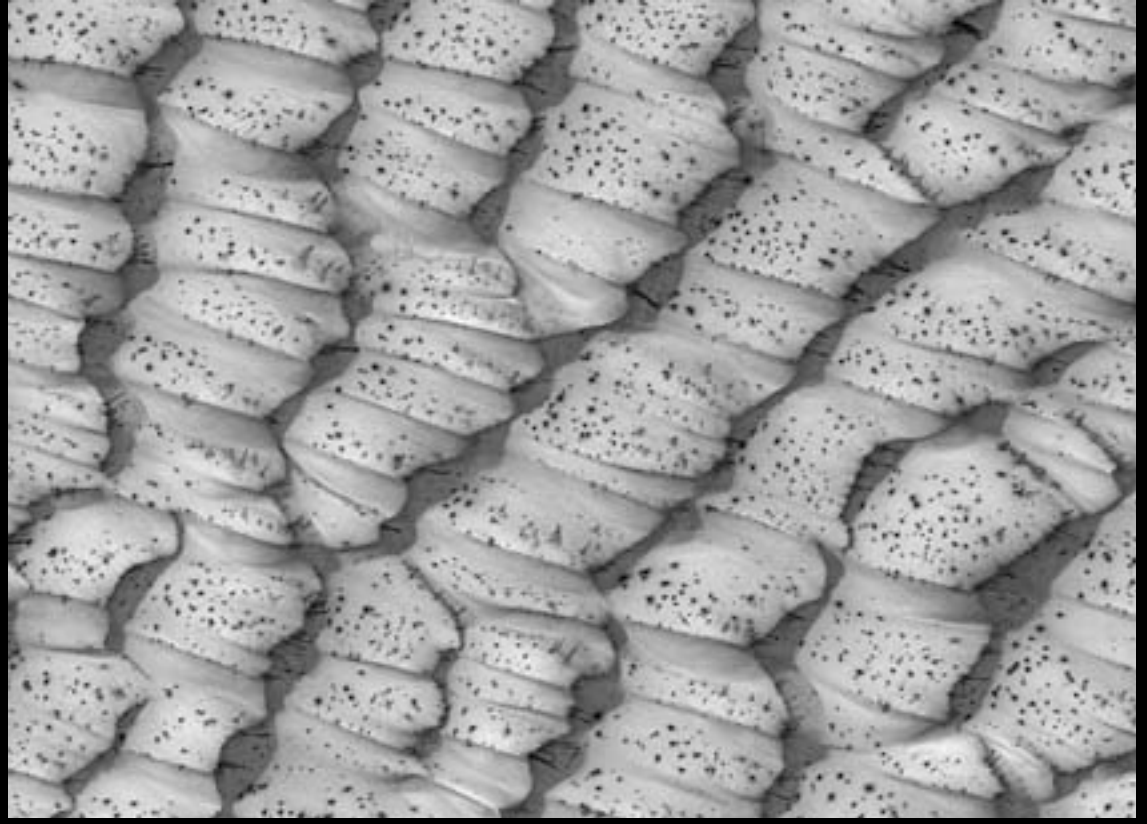

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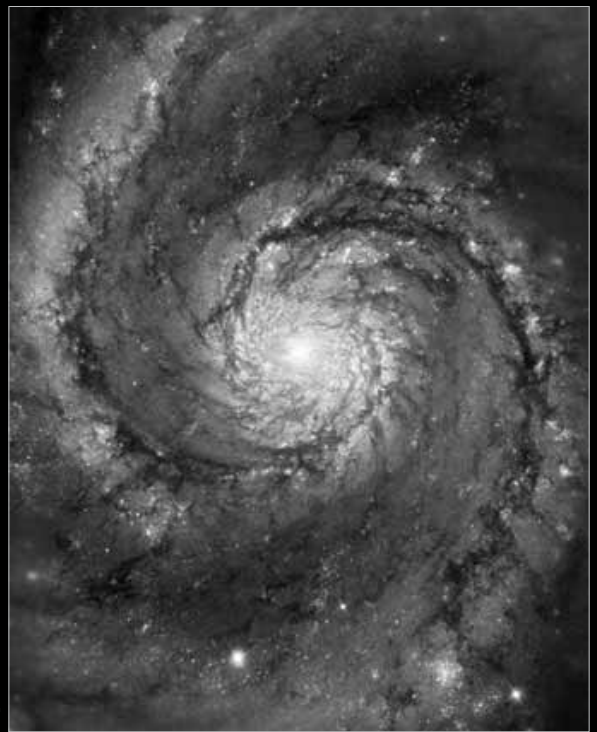

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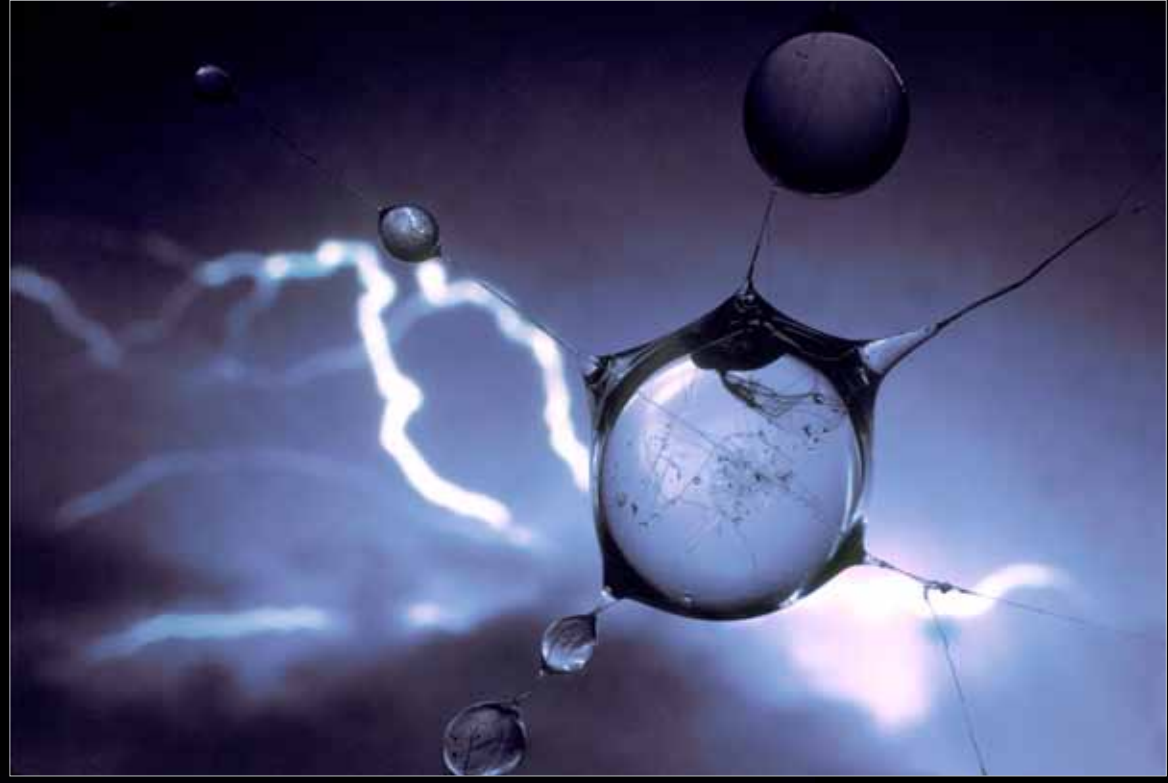
1. A Shadowgraph of a bullet shockwave. PHOTO: Daniel P.B. Smith, MIT, 1962, (under the tutelage of Harold Edgerton).
2. A camera mounted on a NASA satellite recorded these frozen sand dunes on Mars. Dark spots show melting points (NASA satellite image).
3. A spiral array of microtubules within a eukaryote cell.
4. The Hubble Space Telescope reached 31 million years into the past to record this composite image of the Whirlpool galaxy.

NASA, ESA, J. Hester and A. Loll
(Arizona State University)

Provided they are based on fact, photographs of our fast-changing world will continue to provide crucial information to future generations.

This microscopic grain of zircon is 4 billion years old. Bands of colour display its layered structure.



Lightning, a raindrop and a spiderweb recapitulate the origins of life on Earth.

Laboratory experiments in 1953 showed that several amino acids (life's building-blocks) could be synthesised merely by discharging an electrical current into a 'primitive' atmosphere.

This rebound splash followed the fall of a single drop of hydrogen's remarkable oxide, water.

BACKGROUND: The Crab Nebula. INSET: A burl from a Kauri pine.
The nebula and the cancerous burl are both fuelled by hydrogen.
Together, they illustrate the universal nature of cosmic entropy.

BACKGROUND IMAGE: Walter Nowotny (U. Wien); Nordic Optical Telescope.

'Provided they are based on fact, photo-graphs of our fast-changing world will continue to provide crucial information to future generations.'

Queenstown, TAS.

Queenstown, TAS.

Mareeba, QLD.

Sydney, NSW.

Finke, NT.

Kow Swamp, VIC.

BUT IS IT ART?

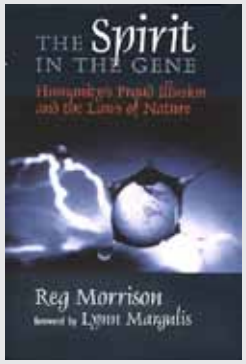
With our species facing the first reproductive decline in its 200,000 year history, with religious fundamentalism on the march, economic disparity growing, fuel and water shortages looming, and with global warming and a mass extinction spreading their corruption through this cosmic Camelot, it is especially sad when talented photographers can find nothing better to say in their pictures than: "Look at me: I am an Artist!"

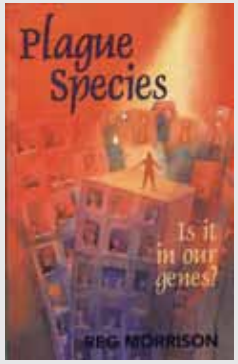
If 'Art' is the only label that fits a picture of mine,
then as a photographer, I have utterly failed.

Reg Morrison

Biographical note

Originally a West Australian newspaperman, Reg Morrison is now a Sydney-based writer-photographer who, for the past 25 years, has specialised in environmental and evolutionary matters.
His latest book, ***Australia's Four-Billion-Year Diary,*** compresses the evolution of the continent, its plants and animals, into twelve 'monthly' episodes, and is essentially designed for High School use. (Sainty & Associates, 2005)





Reg's other recent book, published in 2003 by New Holland, Sydney, under the title ***Plague Species: Is it in our Genes?,*** summarises the massive impact that humans have had on the biosphere, and explores the evolutionary origins of the behaviour that produced this impact. It was originally published in 1999 by Cornell University Press, New York, under the title ***The Spirit in the Gene.***

Other books by Reg Morrison:

Australia, Land Beyond Time, New Holland Publishers, 2002
(original title: ***The Voyage of the Great Southern Ark***, 1988).
The Great Australian Wilderness, Phillip Mathews Publishers, 1993.
Australian's Exposed, Paul Hamlyn, Sydney, 1973.