

Q & A WITH LENNART NILSSON

BY HASSE PERSSON

Hasse Persson: Lennart, because of your scientific photography, you're being seen as one of the history's most significant photographers. You've been richly recognised with distinctions such as your honorary doctorate at the Karolinska Institute in 1976, the Hasselblad Prize in 1980 and many more. But was it always evident for you that you'd be a photographer?

Lennart Nilsson: Dad gave me my first camera when I was eleven. I remember very well my first pictures of a laburnum bush. And even then, I thought it would be exciting to know what the laburnum looked like inside. We were living in Ulriksdal just outside Stockholm, in an apartment that the old State Railways kept for employees. Dad built my first enlarger from a 9-by-12 camera. He was a good amateur photographer himself and taught me the basics. I especially remember how fascinated I was that you could reproduce what you were seeing. So the answer is probably that there never was a choice for me.

Hasse Persson: You found your feet relatively quickly as a press photographer in Stockholm, wouldn't you say?

Lennart Nilsson: Yes, I went up to Vecko-Revyn magazine in the early 40's, before I was even 20. They wanted photo-stories about celebrities and I offered to do one on (jazz singer) Alice Babs, whom I happened to know slightly. So I became a celebrity photographer almost before I knew it.

Hasse Persson: There wasn't a real market in Sweden for photo magazines or photo books until sometime during the Second World War. Did you have any role models at all when you were a teenager?

Lennart Nilsson: (The Swedish) Foto magazine already existed. And I started buying Life after the war. It gave me a lot. Nonetheless, I wanted to work with my own ideas in my one way.

Hasse Persson: Can you give us a few examples of those early photo-stories that you dreamt up and sold to various magazines?

For Se and Vecko-Journalen I did, among others, "A Holiday Evening in

(poet) Dan Andersson's Log Cabin", "Fishermen on the River Congo", "A Travelling Salesman's Weekday", "A Country Postman in Northern Sweden", "Polar Bear Hunting in Spitzbergen" and "A Midwife in Lapland". I was especially fond of that last one. In 1945, I travelled around with a midwife called Siri Sundström up in Arjeplog (in northern Sweden) for a couple of weeks after getting a tip from a doctor who worked in inner Lapland. We travelled around the wilderness in a wood-gas-powered car at first, then on horseback and sometimes, for the final stretch, on skis. Siri was a fantastic woman and it was fascinating to see her at work. She had delivered babies for about 2,500 women in the area. As thanks, I gave her an album with all the pictures. She donated it later to a local museum. A couple of years ago, I came across an old letter from her. It began: "Dear Mr. Nilsson..." I think we were always rather formal with each other!

Hasse Persson: In terms of photography history, it might be of interest that 'your' midwife appeared in 1945 while Eugene Smith did his famous photo-essay "Nurse Midwife" for Life in the autumn of 1951. It can't be ruled out that his inspiration came from your reportage, am I right?

Lennart Nilsson: It's quite possible. The midwife story was the first I did that was sold abroad. I suppose it was just exotic enough. I was 22, and its success provided inspiration for more adventures.

Hasse Persson: That was over 50 years ago, and photographers didn't always carry much weight in editorial offices then. Did you, for example, feel you had the editors' support at the magazines you worked for: Se and Vecko-Journalen?

Lennart Nilsson: Yes, I think I did. A 1954 photo-story on the life of ants, for example, got a ten-page spread in Se. (Poet) Harry Martinson even wrote a poem about the ants. After that, I did a book called Sweden in Profiles. It had pictures of the royal family, industrialists, artists and other cultural celebrities. I got my inspiration from the American business magazine Fortune where Walker Evans was a photographer and also picture editor. Sweden in Profiles (1954), Life in Sea (1959) and Ants (1959) established me as a photographer.

Hasse Persson: Your first contact with Life magazine was in 1947, when the magazine published a fore-page spread on your polar bear hunting reportage in Spitzbergen. What has your relationship been with Life since?

Lennart Nilsson: Incredibly instructive and exciting. I was on the staff at Life for seven years after "The Drama of Life Before Birth" was published in 1965.

It gave me better insight into the reasoning behind photo-story assignments. Only 20 per cent of what the staff photographers shot was ever published. The selection criteria were tough but extremely well thought-out. The first job I did for them on an exclusive basis was when Dag Hammarskjöld was elected UN Secretary General in 1953. I travelled to New York with him and photographed the newly installed Secretary General in his office in the 38th floor in the UN Building. I had my first embryo pictures along with me on that trip. "Unbelievable!" they said at Life. I thought so, too! But I didn't know anything about the development of the foetus and had to learn from scratch. But they were incredibly enthusiastic at Life and twelve years later, in 1965, they published their big story on human reproduction.

Hasse Persson: Even if there was much praise for your Life reportage and for the various editions of *A Child is Born*, some people reacted against your use of aborted foetuses to describe foetus development. Has that criticism affected you?

Lennart Nilsson: To be able to show the development of the foetus at all from the very earliest stage, I used macro-lenses and wide-angled special optics, manufactured specially for me by Karl Storz in Germany and Jungners Optiska in Stockholm. And for technical reasons related to photography, I had to use foetuses from what are called extrauterine pregnancies. But I have also shot living foetuses in the womb using an endoscope. These days, I work with ultrasound and three-dimensional pictures taken through the skin from outside the body. It is a tremendously exciting technique, although it still doesn't reach the same technical quality as my old pictures. But it has allowed me to capture the facial expressions of foetuses, for example, which I couldn't do before. People who have seen ultrasound pictures I have taken in the eighth week of pregnancy say they wonder if any woman could contemplate abortion after having seen them!

Hasse Persson: On the subject of abortion: your pictures have often been used in the debate in both Britain and the USA. When do you believe life begins?

Lennart Nilsson: Right now, nobody can pinpoint when life begins. Whether it is at conception or a few days later. Or even a few weeks. It is definitely clear that life begins early but that the foetus would not survive outside the womb. After three weeks, the embryo becomes elongated, its heart begins beating and the first, primitive brain cells are in place. By then it's a little person, two millimetres long. There are biological, ethical, legal, political and religious evaluations on the creation of life. So the only answer I can give is that it's up to each of us to form an opinion.

Hasse Persson: What is your main equipment when taking your scientific pictures?

Lennart Nilsson: Beside my Hasselblads and Nikons, which I use for normal photo-stories, I have my light- and scanning electron microscopes, made by Zeiss and Japan's Jeol. My endoscopes have also been specially built by Karl Storz and have a focal distance of less than one millimetre, which lets me take razor-sharp pictures inside the body. The most useful tool so far has been a flexible endoscope with a focal distance of less than one-tenth of a millimetre. It's no bigger than eight-tenths of a millimetre in diameter, including lens and case, and can thus be introduced into various parts of the body rather like a catheter. The first 'portrait' of a living foetus was taken in 1965 with one of these endoscopes. It was the opening picture for the Life photo-essay that same year. In the future, though, I'm going to be working mainly on improving ultrasound technology. And I'm continually meeting leading technicians in these areas to develop new technological solutions for photography.

Hasse Persson: When you are working with you scientific pictures, do you still think in photographic terms like picture composition and colours?

Lennart Nilsson: Well, I'm a photographer and even if I'm not an extraordinary one, I try, as all photographers do, to compose my pictures. I also try to think journalistically. Although what's most important is that the picture I utterly true and genuine, even if I sometimes reinforce colours, for example, to clarify.

Hasse Persson: Where do get your inspiration?

Lennart Nilsson: I like to read biographies about people who have contributed a lot to humanity. I listen to classical music when I work, ideally Beethoven. And I hum and sing when I work. It could be old narrative songs or anything at all.

Hasse Persson: If you could live your life over again, would you have preferred to get into scientific photography earlier?

Lennart Nilsson: In 1958, I believe, I was thinking about giving up photography for five years to study medicine. I didn't want to become a doctor, but wanted to learn the basics. But a professor I was working with advised against it. He said, "Lennart, don't lose those five valuable years. Read the literature and then put us researchers to use – we'll have all the latest news!"

Hasse Persson: Much of your interest in technology comes from your father, Nils, who was important for your choice of career. Can you point out any photographers who have been important for you in your work?

Lennart Nilsson: Henri Cartier-Bresson and Eugene Smith have been important for me. And, in earlier days, the Canadian Yousuf Karsh and his portraits. Later I got to know Irving Penn, who is a wonderful portrait photographer. Among Swedish photographers, the first that come to mind are Hans Hammarskiöld and Georg Oddner. The hardest thing for a photographer I portraying everyday life. What's closest to us, and what most people know best.

Hasse Persson: Who, within the word of science, do you most admire and which qualities in people do you rank highest?

Lennart Nilsson: You have to admire Louis Pasteur (1822-1895) and Marie Curie (1867-1935). And I think originality of ideas is important. The greatest thing is to be first with an idea!

Hasse Persson: You, if anyone, have visually studied the beginning of life close-up. I wonder if you've ever seen God in your microscopes?

Lennart Nilsson: Not directly. But I've seen what He does!

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