CLOSE-UP

Focused and Shooting In the Line of Fire

Pigi Cipelli Photographs History-Making Events, From The Velvet Revolution to Genoa's G-8 Protests

By John Moretti
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Pigi Cipelli, at left in Red Square, has been on the scene at the past decade's most memorable events: Here, aboard a rubber raft bound from Vlore, Albania to Puglia in 1997. It was on the cover of Sette weekly and won the photographer a prize. Below, from left: an Eritrean fighter in 2000; a homeless Moldavian child in 1997; inside Cuban prisons in 1999. Underneath, from left, then-Serbian President Milosevic in Gazimestan, Kosovo, delivering a speech to Serbs in June 1989; Sarajevo, June 1992. Bottom: the line-up of police officers in Genoa during the G-8 summit, taken just minutes before the photographer was injured.

Pigi Cipelli talks very fast because he has an infinite number of stories to tell in a finite amount of time, and time is a luxury few photojournalists can afford.

Cipelli, 36, has witnessed first-hand most of the events that shaped Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall. In 1989, he was swarmed by students during the Velvet Revolution in Prague and saw the fall of a regime in Romania. That same year, he heard a stirring speech delivered to Serbs in Kosovo by Serbia's newly inaugurated president, Slobodan Milosevic. In 1993, Cipelli hid in an apartment in Sarajevo as a gunman fired shots out the window. Later, Belgrade accused him of spying as he covered the effects of the embargo.

In 1998, he followed relief workers in Somalia and Rwanda and in 2000 he documented the Eritrea-Ethiopia war.

He is considered the first journalist to be injured during the G-8 protests in Genoa, the last journalist allowed aboard immigrant rafts bound for Italy from Albania and the only one to phototograph the inside of Cuban prisons.

But he was miles away from the attacks that would spawn what U.S. President George W. Bush called "the first war of the 21st century."

There has been no lack of images from that September morning and the week of sorrow that followed, among them, likely prize-winning photos. Still, Cipelli is not upset that he wasn't there in time, he says, because he couldn't have done a good job anyway.

"It was such a large and historic event that I don't think I could have told the whole story," he says.

The son of a manager of a multinational refrigeration company, Cipelli traveled a lot as a child. He studied foreign languages in high school. But it wasn't until a week after the the Berlin Wall crumbled, when he was 24, that he learned the benefits of being in the right place at the right time.

He was listening to the "Voice of America" on the radio in his Milan apartment and planning an upcoming trip to Prague.

"There were rumours of revolution," he remembers, "and I was almost packed anyway." He tucked his Nikon F-3 into his metallic-gray Fiat Uno diesel and left ahead of schedule.

Within a few dozen hours he would find himself on the same balcony as soon-to-be president Vaclav Havel, standing above a crowd of thousands of student protesters, who would bring about the end of Czecholslovakia's Communist rule.

"For a second I thought I was the only photographer on the scene. Then I turned around and saw Peter Turnley from Newsweek," he says. "At that moment, I saw how history is made. And everything was done without violence and was carried out by young people."

After shooting several rolls of film, he brought them to the Italian Embassy and asked officials to hold onto them until it was safe to bring them home.

"'Don't worry,' they told me, 'this thing will blow over soon and everything will be back to normal.'" He hid them in his hotel room instead.

Cipelli's baptism by fire into the world of photojournalism would come days later. When he heard that Romania's Nicholae Ceaucescu was being overthrown, he raced down to Bucharest from Prague.

He was stopped by several civilian barricades along the way, he remembers, and at one of them, police rumbled down the road in armored vehicles and opened fire on the crowd. Cipelli hid behind a tree. He decided to take a train to Bucharest to watch the action unfold, and abandoned his car at the station. (He found it intact on the way home.)

When Cipelli returned from Milosevic's Kosovo speech in June 1989, few magazines were interested in photos of a man and place only a handful of readers had heard of. But in late December, when Cipelli took his images of Bucharest and Prague to the offices of "Epoca," the now-defunct photo monthly put out by Mondadori, it was the beginning of a career.

With Epoca, he had assignments in Belgrade and Sarajevo, covering some of the more dramatic events of the decade. He visited remote corners of the globe. Not long after he produced a 16-page spread on a voyage through Jakutsk, in Siberia, where the temperature hit negative 50 degrees Celsius, the magazine folded. It was 1996.

"I was orphaned when Epoca closed," Cipelli says, "not because I was out of work, but because it was one of the only places where you could tell stories through photos alone."

A year later, he would sniff out his best scoop: a trip on one of the rubber speedboats that carried Kurdish immigrants from Albania to Italian shores. It was a rare opportunity and it would win him and Corriere della Sera journalist Francesco Battistini the *Premiolino* prize.

About midway from Albania to Puglia, Cipelli needed to shine some light on the three dozen subjects crammed into the rubber raft. He asked Battistini to light up a flare, a diplomatically delicate maneuver on a clandestine operation by night.

When the boats approached Italian shores, the pilots wouldn't let the Italians get off, as they didn't want journalists to discover what they did with the bushels of marijuana they were carrying. Anyway, Cipelli has photos of the bags being stuffed with drugs.

The two floated back to Albania.

"Then Pigi turned to me and said he wasn't sure if the photos came out, and he asked if I'd mind if we took another trip. That's when I realized this guy was crazy, but professionally very good," says Battistini, speaking on his cell phone from Islamabad, Pakistan.

They made another trip. But again, they were not allowed to land on Italian soil to follow the immigrants.

"Pigi was trying to convince them that the magazine had to close the issue that night, so we had to get out. But they took us back, and the next morning at 6 A.M., Pigi walked down to the pilot's house, knocked on his door, and reminded him that the deal was we'd get our money back if we didn't make it to Italy."

Cipelli came back with the 600 Deutsche marks apiece they'd paid for the voyage. "He was very satisfied," Battistini says.

Since then, no journalist has been allowed on the rafts.

Cipelli has been back to Albania several times since, one time to photograph the kidnapping of the national chief of police. In 1999, he went back to Kosovo to cover the war.

These days, he has a fading scar that tells the story of his first injury on the job: a wound from a police baton he suffered on the streets of Genoa.

"It was a calm situation, most of the Black Bloc members had already done their damage and escaped, but there were a line of policemen on Corso Torino getting ready for their first reprisals. About 20 of them split off and started heading for the demonstrators. [The demostrators] headed for shelter in a phone booth nearby," he recalls.

"I followed them and started taking photos by the phone booth when the first police arrived. I threw up my hands, and told them 'I'm a journalist from Panorama. I'm just doing my job!'

"Those police left me alone, but when I turned around there was another one and he hit me with his baton on my shoulders. I put my hand up to my head and felt blood. I shouted 'What the hell are you doing? I'm a journalist!' He told me to get lost before it happened again.

"Later, I found a doctor and he suggested I go to the hospital. The nurse there said, 'Well, it looks like the first one has arrived!'"

He received five stitches.

Cipelli has a photo of himself and his bloodied hand, but he doesn't want to see it published.

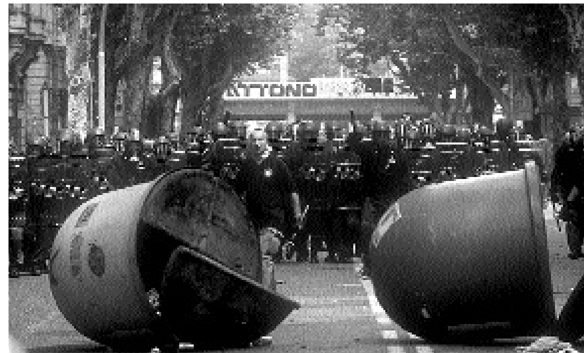
"I think that would be a little exaggerated," he says.

Indeed, there are a lot of photos of momentous events, he says, that are meant only to shock. The New York Times recently received a slew of letters for an image they printed of a body falling from the World Trade Center after the attacks.

He flips through a copy of Time magazine and sees a similar one. "Thank God you can't see the face," he says.

"This is a problem that we talk about a lot. There are times when you simply cannot intervene. It's right to shoot the photo and then evaluate afterward whether it should be published."

A good photo, he says, is one that stops to make you think. "Often we remember a disaster from the images alone."



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FLY ON THE WALL

By Christopher Emsden
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Centenarian Scientist Left Atoms for Orchids

Major newspapers have offered plenty of grisly explanations of how science has changed and will change warfare, with bio-chemistry apparently in the vanguard today.

Franco Rasetti must be shuddering.

A star student of Enrico Fermi, who went on to work on the Manhattan project, Rasetti was an accomplished nuclear physicist, but after Hiroshima wanted nothing to do with the field.

Today, Rasetti, who will turn 100 on Sept. 29, is an avid experimental gardener and a botanical expert on the secret life of orchids.

"The atomic bomb turned me away from physics," he said.

Still, he can only remember the Museum of Physics and attached Fermi research center in Rome, on the same street – via Panisperna – where he collaborated with Fermi and others to create one of the most illustrious scientific teams in Italian history.

Pisa-born Rasetti originally set out to be an engineer, but was convinced by his eventual master to switch track during his undergraduate years. He then took up a teaching post in spectroscopy in Rome and became perhaps the nation's most prodigious experimental scientist during the heroic years of nuclear physics.

He created a giant fog chamber, then a spectrometer to take gamma rays and eventually create large crystals to assess the many theories of the day.

A noted skeptic, he successfully rubbished a once-famous claim by a Russian biologist that "mythogenic" radiation could be seen in the roots of onions, one of several grandiloquent claims of the 1920s, and the subject of more than 500 approving scientific papers, some of which promised that cancer could be better understood and fought on the basis of the discovery.

Having fled to Quebec in 1939, after the development and first military application of the atomic bomb, Rasetti decided to change his specialty. He went to Johns Hopkins University in Bologna and became a prominent paleontologist, hunting for fossiles instead of new subatomic particles.

Finally, he devoted himself to flowers, a subject that in fact had helped him early on in his career, as Fermi was reportedly stunned at how much his student could say about the flora they passed while on walks in the mountains.

His "Flowers of the Alps," recently republished by the Lincei Academy, remains a classic field guide.

But nuclear physics in Italy goes on.

A European laboratory, sponsored by Italy's Nuclear Physics Institute and a French counterpart, will be set up next year in Cascina, near Pisa, and given 10 years to hunt for gravitational waves and track down the perturbations of space-time that until now have been only notional entities in the theory of general relativity.

Scientists hope the waves will help explain the interaction between black holes and the big bang they say kicked the universe into being. Work as the Cascina laboratory be based on laser interferometry conducted with the help of two three-kilometer-long vacuum tubes, through which infrared laser rays will be shot.

Scientists say the new system will allow for movements a billion times smaller than an atom to be detected.

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