

Daniel B. Levin

Clayton Patterson: Little Brother Is Watching Big Brother

My history with Clayton goes back to my teenage years. I met Clayton and Elsa through a friend and was introduced to the Clayton Gallery & Outlaw Art Museum, where I eagerly attended various shows and events over the years. I related to Clayton's photography, his love of New York City and the unique culture and characters he documented.

I left New York City for college in 2000 to study film and photography, and in my first week of freshman year, 9/11 occurred and forever changed the city we loved. Change is undeniable, and it puts great value on properly documenting the past and present. Each time I came home, I found it challenging to comprehend how fast and extreme the gentrification was. During my four years of school, seven high-rise buildings went up within a three-block radius of my childhood loft on 26th street in Chelsea. Chelsea had undergone a considerable real-estate surge, and I sensed that the same was about to happen to Clayton's Lower East Side. It was against that backdrop that we decided to make a documentary about his life's work. *Captured* (2008) was the first time that Clayton's diverse catalogue of work and his history had been compiled in one cohesive story. Making that film was important for both of us. I was able to make my first feature film, and Clayton was able to share his 30-year odyssey.

Clayton's work remains important and historic, and his documentation and dedication are unparalleled. What began as a love for photographing residents of the neighborhood and members of the counterculture in the 1980s transformed into activism: a message to be vigilant and communicate one's own story. In the 1980s, Clayton was documenting the fringe of society, including the homeless and squatter communities in and around Tompkins Square Park, which led him to the park on August 6th, 1988. Clayton's video of the 1988 Tompkins Square Park police riot proved a pivotal moment for video activism and Clayton's artistic message alike.

Clayton became a police target and part of the controversy. Following his arrest for refusal to hand over his riot tape to authorities—out of fear for its disappearance and on the grounds that it was his art—he gained

national attention and declared on Oprah that now “little brother is watching big brother.” This proclamation became his rallying cry to empower people to use the camera as a tool to hold authorities accountable, document situations and defend one's community.

In 1988, Clayton was using a new technology, the Prosumer video camera, which had just become available to the public. Since then, cameras have become increasingly accessible, and the proliferation of the cell-phone camera has enabled citizens—as seen in recent tragic cases like those of Eric Garner and Walter Scott—to have a say and keep a watchful eye. The influence of Clayton's riot tape carries through from the Rodney King video to these recent police headlines, which have all cemented videography as an activist tool to monitor a system that constantly monitors its citizens but does not adequately monitor itself. It's sad to think that while technology has changed, police misconduct and abuse of noncriminals and the poor and powerless have not.

Watching the riot tape and using it as the climax of *Captured* influenced my camera work. There is a moment on the riot tape that I always identify as the “film school” shot of *Captured*, one that should be taught and studied in documentary classes. It comes toward the end of the riot, when Clayton nimbly moves between both sides of the protest line. Because Clayton is a neighborhood figure, he knows all the players involved in the riot, from the protesters to the cops. The shot begins as he follows a priest from the police side of the line to the protest side. The priest confronts one of the protesters who is yelling “Fascists!” at the police and notifies him that there is going to be a meeting. A bottle is thrown offscreen, tensions flare and the police surge past. The cops notice Paul Garrin filming on the roof of a van. They pull him down and strike him against a wall. The “white shirt” cops struggle to maintain control, but the looks of confusion and concern on the officers' faces reveal the unfolding state of the chaos. This one shot not only tells the whole story of the riot in a microcosm but is also a remarkable feat of documentary filmmaking. To have such access—the result of Clayton's knowledge of his community—and to have the ability to move

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through that scene from both sides yet not have his camera seized while someone else in front of him does is remarkable. The scene plays in *Captured* for almost a minute uncut. Uncut takes in documentaries are a testament to skilled camera work, and to pull this off during a scene of such upheaval is masterful.

In 2010, I found myself in a similar situation in Newark while filming the show *Brick City*, for the Sundance Channel. We gained extensive knowledge and access to the community, the police and the politicians, and found ourselves in the middle of a protest regarding police brutality, which ended with a scuffle between police and protesters. As I filmed the scene, I kept thinking back to and focusing on the Thompson Square Park riot tape, and tried my best to echo Clayton's fluid one-minute shot. My long uncut takes ended up making the show, shots which I captured with Clayton's guidance.

I made *Captured* to shine a light on Clayton and Elsa's diverse and extensive work. Elsa is a huge part of the equation and an extraordinary artist in her own right. From running tapes and batteries back and forth on the night of the riot to her own beautiful and intricate acrylic paintings, Elsa is an indispensable part of an amazing artistic duo.

It's been almost 10 years since we began making *Captured*, and since then I have grown professionally in the television- and-film business. I will always look back on *Captured* as one of my greatest achievements. I believe Clayton's work must be saved, preserved and appreciated. I still dream of the day when tourists venture down to the Lower East Side to visit the Clayton Gallery & Outlaw Art Museum, to see and purchase his work and to speak with the artist himself for a fuller understanding and appreciation of New York City and the Lower East Side.

Clayton's archives are New York City's archives and should be valued as such. Clayton is an inspiration, an educator, a collaborator, mentor and friend. With all the change that has happened in New York City, I can continue to progress knowing that the creative, chaotic, colorful and grimy New York City that I grew

up in still lives in Clayton Patterson's collection of exceptional street photography and video and his ever-influential archive.

Captured (2008), a film By Ben Solomon, Daniel B. Levin and Jenner Furst: www.capturedmovie.com