

Sfoto (2004)

Documentary aesthetics ennobles garbage collecting

“HERE YOU ARE, HE SAID and slipped a lukewarm Pepsi into my hand. There we were, sitting on two crates of pop in the scorching sun and fumbling with small talk. The last garbage trucks from the Mexican city Cuernavaca’s wealthier areas had just been around for the last time. He was only going to feed the pigs before it was time to head on homewards.”

Johan Sundgren tells us on the brief introduction /text on the back-cover of his book **Los Pепенadores** (The Scavengers / Sopsamlarna) about his first encounter with one of them, Don Chaquetín.

There would be more encounters. When Johan Sundgren was trained in photography at the Escuela Activa de Fotografía in Cuernavaca, Mexico, he chose to live with the garbage gatherers for longer periods at the city’s garbage plant Milpillas. It resulted in a story balancing on the border between the big reportage and a small book. Altogether there are twenty-three fantastic images in black and white and a longer concluding text in three languages (Spanish, English and Swedish) by the writer and cultural critic **Stefan Jonsson**.

The design is traditional, one image on the right side of each opening and a title on the left page. Unfortunately the title is only in Spanish and although the images are very photographic and convincing enough on their own, they can be felt as slightly abandoned without the describing words.

As known photo-journalism is about both text and image, and it is not until I have read and reflected upon the text that I capture the pictures completely and see how Johan Sundgren with his documentary aesthetics “ennobles” ,to use the words of Stefan Jonsson , the garbage collecting to become an example of the struggle of human life – from birth, of the first day – as in the photo of the newly baptized Maribel – to death, the last day – as in the picture “Chupacabra’s last day”, where the deceased rests on a frail bunk bed in the middle of the dump.

Johan Sundgren and Stefan Jonsson tells us a concerning and committed story about finding value in the garbage – not only one that can be converted into money, but also a human value.

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