

The Suit and the Photograph

What did August Sander tell his sitters before he took their pictures? And how did he say it so that they all believed him in the same way?

They each look at the camera with the same expression in their eyes. Insofar as there are differences, these are the results of the sitter's experience and character — the priest has lived a different life from the paper-hanger; but to all of them Sander's camera represents the same thing.

Did he simply say that their photographs were going to be a recorded part of history? And did he refer to history in such a way that their vanity and shyness dropped away, so that they looked into the lens telling themselves, using a strange historical tense: *I looked like this*. We cannot know. We simply have to recognise the uniqueness of his work, which he planned with the overall title of "Man of the 20th Century."

His full aim was to find, around Cologne in the area in which he was born in 1876, archetypes to represent every possible type, social class, sub-class, job, vocation, privilege. He hoped to take, in all, 600 portraits. His project was cut short by Hitler's Third Reich.

His son Erich, a socialist and anti-nazi was sent to a concentration camp where he died. The father hid his archives in the countryside. What remains today is an extraordinary social and human document. No other photographer, taking portraits of his own countrymen, has ever been so translucently documentary.

Walter Benjamin wrote in 1931 about Sander's work:

"It was not as a scholar, advised by race theorists or social researchers, that the author [Sander] undertook his enormous task, but, in the publisher's words, 'as the result of immediate observation.' It is indeed unprejudiced observation, bold and at the same time delicate, very much

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in the spirit of Goethe's remark: 'There is a delicate form of the empirical which identifies itself so intimately with its object that it thereby becomes theory.' Accordingly it is quite proper that an observer like Döblin should light upon



precisely the scientific aspects of this opus and point out: 'Just as there is a comparative anatomy which enables one to understand the nature and history of organs, so here the photographer has produced a comparative photography, thereby gaining a scientific standpoint which places him beyond the photographer of detail.' It would be lamentable if economic circumstances prevented the further publication of this extraordinary corpus . . . Sander's work is more than a picture book, it is an atlas of instruction.'

In the inquiring spirit of Benjamin's remarks I want to examine Sander's well-known photograph of three young peasants on the road in the evening, going to a dance. There is as much descriptive information in this image as in pages by a descriptive master like Zola. Yet I only want to consider one thing: their suits.

The date is 1914. The three young men belong, at the very most, to the second generation who ever wore such suits in the European countryside. Twenty or 30 years earlier, such clothes did not exist at a price which peasants could afford. Among the young today, formal dark suits have become rare in the villages of at least western Europe. But for most of this century most peasants — and most workers — wore dark three-piece suits on ceremonial occasions, Sundays and fêtes.

When I go to a funeral in the village where I live, the men of my age and older are still wearing them. Of course there have been modifications of fashion: the width of trousers and lapels, the length of jackets change. Yet the physical character of the suit and its message does not change.

Let us first consider its physical character. Or, more precisely, its physical character when worn by village peasants. And to make generalisation more convincing, let us look at a second photograph of a village band.

Sander took this group portrait in 1913, yet it could well have been the band at the dance for which the three with their walking sticks are setting out along the road. Now make an experiment. Block out the faces of the band with a piece of paper, and consider only their clothed bodies.

By no stretch of the imagination can you believe that these bodies belong to the middle or ruling class. They might belong to workers, rather than peasants; but otherwise there is no doubt. Nor is the clue their hands — as it would be if you could touch them. Then why is their class so apparent?

Is it a question of fashion and the quality of the cloth of their suits? In real life such details would be telling. In a small black and white photograph they are not very evident. Yet the static photograph shows, perhaps more vividly than in life, the fundamental reason why the suits, far from

disguising the social class of those who wore them, underlined and emphasised it.

Their suits deform them. Wearing them, they look as though they were physically mis-shapen. A past style in clothes often looks absurd until it is re-incorporated into fashion. Indeed the economic logic of fashion depends on making the old-fashioned look absurd. But here we are not faced primarily with that kind of absurdity; here the clothes look less absurd, less “abnormal” than the men’s bodies which are in them.

The musicians give the impression of being uncoordinated, bandy-legged, barrel-chested, low-arsed, twisted or scalene. The violinist on the right is made to look almost like a dwarf. None of their abnormalities is extreme. They do not provoke pity. They are just sufficient to undermine physical dignity. We look at bodies which appear coarse, clumsy, brute-like. And incorrigibly so.

Now make the experiment the other way round. Cover the bodies of the band and look only at their faces. They are country faces. Nobody could suppose that they are a group of barristers or managing directors. They are five men from a village who like to make music and do so with a certain self-respect. As we look at the faces we can imagine what the bodies would look like. And what we imagine is quite different from what we have just seen. In imagination we see them as their parents might remember them when absent. We accord them the normal dignity they have.

To make the point clearer, let us now consider an image where tailored clothes, instead of deforming, *preserve* the physical identity and therefore the natural authority of those wearing them. I have deliberately chosen a Sander photograph which looks old-fashioned and could easily lend itself to parody: the photograph of four Protestant

missionaries in 1931.

Despite the portentousness, it is not even necessary to



make the experiment of blocking out the faces. It is clear that here the suits actually confirm and enhance the physical presence of those wearing them. The clothes convey the same message as the faces and as the history of the bodies they hide. Suits, experience, social formation and function coincide.

Look back now at the three on the road to the dance. Their hands look too big, their bodies too thin, their legs too short. (They use their walking sticks as though they were driving cattle.) We can make the same experiment with the faces and the effect is exactly the same as with the band. They can wear only their hats as if they suited them.

Where does this lead us? Simply to the conclusion that peasants can't buy good suits and don't know how to wear them? No, what is at issue here is a graphic, if small, example (perhaps one of the most graphic which exists) of what Gramsci called class hegemony. Let us look at the contradictions involved more closely.

Most peasants, if not suffering from malnutrition, are physically strong and well-developed. Well-developed because of the very varied hard physical work they do. It would be too simple to make a list of physical characteristics — broad hands through working with them from a very early age, broad shoulders relative to the body through the habit of carrying, and so on. In fact many variations and exceptions also exist. One can, however, speak of a characteristic physical rhythm which most peasants, both women and men, acquire.

This rhythm is directly related to the energy demanded by the amount of work which has to be done in a day, and is reflected in typical physical movements and stance. It is an extended sweeping rhythm. Not necessarily slow. The traditional acts of scything or sawing may exemplify it. The

way peasants ride horses makes it distinctive, as also the way they walk, as if testing the earth with each stride. In addition peasants possess a special physical dignity: this is determined by a kind of functionalism, a way of being *fully at home in effort*.

The suit, as we know it today, developed in Europe as a professional ruling class costume in the last third of the 19th century. Almost anonymous as a uniform, it was the first ruling class costume to idealise purely *sedentary* power. The power of the administrator and conference table. Essentially the suit was made for the gestures of talking and calculating abstractly. (As distinct, compared to previous upper class costumes, from the gestures of riding, hunting, dancing, duelling.)

It was the English *gentleman*, with all the apparent restraint which that new stereotype implied, who launched the suit. It was a costume which inhibited vigorous action, and which action ruffled, uncreased and spoilt. "Horses sweat, men perspire and women glow." By the turn of the century, and increasingly after the first world war, the suit was mass-produced for mass urban and rural markets.

The physical contradiction is obvious. Bodies which are fully at home in effort, bodies which are used to extended sweeping movement: clothes idealising the sedentary, the discrete, the effortless. I would be the last to argue for a return to traditional peasant costumes. Any such return is bound to be escapist, for these costumes were a form of capital handed down through generations, and in the world today, in which every corner is dominated by the market, such a principle is anachronistic.

We can note, however, how traditional peasant working or ceremonial clothes respected the specific character of the bodies they were clothing. They were in general loose, and

only tight in places where they were gathered to allow for freer movement. They were the antithesis of tailored clothes, clothes cut to follow the idealised shape of a more or less stationary body and then to hang from it!

Yet nobody forced peasants to buy suits, and the three on their way to the dance are clearly proud of them. They wear them with a kind of panache. This is exactly why the suit might become a classic and easily taught example of class hegemony.

Villagers — and, in a different way, city workers — were persuaded to choose suits. By publicity. By pictures. By the new mass media. By salesmen. By example. By the sight of new kinds of travellers. And also by political developments of accommodation and state central organisation. For example: in 1900, on the occasion of the great Universal Exhibition, all the mayors of France were, for the first time ever, invited to a banquet in Paris. Most of them were the peasant mayors of village communes. Nearly 30,000 came! And, naturally, for the occasion the vast majority wore suits.

The working classes — but peasants were simpler and more naïve about it than workers — came to accept *as their own* certain standards of the class that ruled over them — in this case standards of chic and sartorial worthiness. At the same time their very acceptance of these standards, their very conforming to these norms which had nothing to do with either their own inheritance or their daily experience, condemned them, within the system of those standards, to being always, and recognisably to the classes above them, second-rate, clumsy, uncouth, defensive. That indeed is to succumb to a cultural hegemony.

Perhaps one can nevertheless propose that when the three arrived and had drunk a beer or two, and had eyed the girls (whose clothes had not yet changed so drastically), they

hung up their jackets, took off their ties, and danced, maybe wearing their hats, until the morning and the next day's work.

1979

Photographs of Agony

The news from Vietnam did not make big headlines in the papers this morning. It was simply reported that the American air force is systematically pursuing its policy of bombing the north. Yesterday there were 270 raids.

Behind this report there is an accumulation of other information. The day before yesterday the American air force launched the heaviest raids of this month. So far more bombs have been dropped this month than during any other comparable period. Among the bombs being dropped are the seven-ton superbombs, each of which flattens an area of approximately 8,000 square metres. Along with the large bombs, various kinds of small antipersonnel bombs are being dropped. One kind is full of plastic barbs which, having ripped through the flesh and embedded themselves in the body, cannot be located by x-ray. Another is called the Spider: a small bomb like a grenade with almost invisible 30-centimetre-long antennae, which, if touched, act as detonators. These bombs, distributed over the ground where larger explosions have taken place, are designed to blow up survivors who run to put out the fires already burning, or go to help those already wounded.

There are no pictures from Vietnam in the papers today. But there is a photograph taken by Donald McCullin in Hue in 1968 which could have been printed with the reports this morning. (See *The Destruction Business* by Donald McCullin, London, 1972.) It shows an old man squatting with a child in his arms, both of them are bleeding profusely with the black blood of black-and-white photographs.

In the last year or so, it has become normal for certain mass circulation newspapers to publish war photographs which earlier would have been suppressed as being too shocking. One might explain this development by arguing

that these newspapers have come to realise that a large section of their readers are now aware of the horrors of war and want to be shown the truth. Alternatively, one might argue that these newspapers believe that their readers have become inured to violent images and so now compete in terms of ever more violent sensationalism.

The first argument is too idealistic and the second too transparently cynical. Newspapers now carry violent war photographs because their effect, except in rare cases, is not what it was once presumed to be. A paper like the *Sunday Times* continues to publish shocking photographs about Vietnam or about Northern Ireland whilst politically supporting the policies responsible for the violence. This is why we have to ask: What effect do such photographs have?

Many people would argue that such photographs remind us shockingly of the reality, the lived reality, behind the abstractions of political theory, casualty statistics or news bulletins. Such photographs, they might go on to say, are printed on the black curtain which is drawn across what we choose to forget or refuse to know. According to them, McCullin serves as an eye we cannot shut. Yet what is it that they make us see?

They bring us up short. The most literal adjective that could be applied to them is *arresting*. We are seized by them. (I am aware that there are people who pass them over, but about them there is nothing to say.) As we look at them, the moment of the other's suffering engulfs us. We are filled with either despair or indignation. Despair takes on some of the other's suffering to no purpose. Indignation demands action. We try to emerge from the moment of the photograph back into our lives. As we do so, the contrast is such that the resumption of our lives appears to be a hopelessly inadequate response to what we have just seen.

McCullin's most typical photographs record sudden moments of agony — a terror, a wounding, a death, a cry of grief. These moments are in reality utterly discontinuous with normal time. It is the knowledge that such moments are probable and the anticipation of them that makes "time" in the front line unlike all other experiences of time. The camera which isolates a moment of agony isolates no more violently than the experience of that moment isolates itself. The word *trigger*, applied to rifle and camera, reflects a correspondence which does not stop at the purely mechanical. The image seized by the camera is doubly violent and both violences reinforce the same contrast: the contrast between the photographed moment and all others.

As we emerge from the photographed moment back into our lives, we do not realise this; we assume that the discontinuity is our responsibility. The truth is that any response to that photographed moment is bound to be felt as inadequate. Those who are there in the situation being photographed, those who hold the hand of the dying or staunch a wound, are not seeing the moment as we have and their responses are of an altogether different order. It is not possible for anyone to look pensively at such a moment and to emerge stronger. McCullin, whose "contemplation" is both dangerous and active, writes bitterly underneath a photograph: "I only use the camera like I use a toothbrush. It does the job."

The possible contradictions of the war photograph now become apparent. It is generally assumed that its purpose is to awaken concern. The most extreme examples — as in most of McCullin's work — show moments of agony in order to extort the maximum concern. Such moments, whether photographed or not, are discontinuous with all other moments. They exist by themselves. But the reader

who has been arrested by the photograph may tend to feel this discontinuity as his own personal moral inadequacy. *And as soon as this happens even his sense of shock is dispersed:* his own moral inadequacy may now shock him as much as the crimes being committed in the war. Either he shrugs off this sense of inadequacy as being only too familiar, or else he thinks of performing a kind of penance — of which the purest example would be to make a contribution to OXFAM or to UNICEF.

In both cases, the issue of the war which has caused that moment is effectively depoliticised. The picture becomes evidence of the general human condition. It accuses nobody and everybody.

Confrontation with a photographed moment of agony can mask a far more extensive and urgent confrontation. Usually the wars which we are shown are being fought directly or indirectly in “our” name. What we are shown horrifies us. The next step should be for us to confront our own lack of political freedom. In the political systems as they exist, we have no legal opportunity of effectively influencing the conduct of wars waged in our name. To realise this and to act accordingly is the only effective way of responding to what the photograph shows. Yet the double violence of the photographed moment actually works against this realisation. That is why they can be published with impunity.

1972

Paul Strand

There is a widespread assumption that if one is interested in the visual, one’s interest must be limited to a technique of somehow *treating* the visual. Thus the visual is divided into categories of special interest: painting, photography, real appearances, dreams and so on. And what is forgotten — like all essential questions in a positivist culture — is the meaning and enigma of visibility itself.

I think of this now because I want to describe what I can see in two books which are in front of me. They are two volumes of a retrospective monograph on the work of Paul Strand. The first photographs date from 1915, when Strand was a sort of pupil of Alfred Stieglitz; the most recent ones were taken in 1968.

The earliest works deal mostly with people and sites in New York. The first of them shows a half-blind beggar woman. One of her eyes is opaque, the other sharp and wary. Round her neck she wears a label with **BLIND** printed on it. It is an image with a clear social message. But it is something else, too. We shall see later that in all Strand’s best photographs of people, he presents us with the visible evidence, not just of their presence, but of their *life*. At one level, such evidence of a life is social comment — Strand has consistently taken a left political position — but, at a different level, such evidence serves to suggest visually the totality of another lived life, from within which we ourselves are no more than a sight. This is why the black letters **B-L-I-N-D** on a white label do more than spell the word. While the picture remains in front of us, we can never take them as read. The earliest image in the book forces us to reflect on the significance of seeing itself.

The next section of photographs, from the 1920s, includes photographs of machine parts and close-ups of various

natural forms — roots, rocks and grasses. Already Strand's technical perfectionism and strong aesthetic interests are apparent. But equally his obstinate, resolute respect for the thing-in-itself is also apparent. And the result is often disconcerting. Some would say that these photographs fail, for they remain details of what they have been taken from: they never become independent images. Nature, in these photographs, is intransigent to art, and the machine-details mock the stillness of their perfectly rendered images.

From the 1930s onwards, the photographs fall typically into groups associated with journeys that Strand made: to Mexico, New England, France, Italy, the Hebrides, Egypt, Ghana, Rumania. These are the photographs for which Strand has become well-known, and it is on the evidence of these photographs that he should be considered a great photographer. With these black-and-white photographs, with these records which are distributable anywhere, he offers us the sight of a number of places and people in such a way that our view of the world can be qualitatively extended.

The social approach of Strand's photography to reality might be called documentary or neo-realist in so far as its obvious cinematic equivalent is to be found in the prewar films of Flaherty or the immediate postwar Italian films of de Sica or Rossellini. This means that on his travels Strand avoids the picturesque, the panoramic, and tries to find a city in a street, the way of life of a nation in the corner of a kitchen. In one or two pictures of power dams and some "heroic" portraits he gives way to the romanticism of Soviet socialist realism. But mostly his approach lets him choose ordinary subjects which in their ordinariness are extraordinarily representative.

He has an infallible eye for the quintessential: whether it

is to be found on a Mexican doorstep, or in the way that an Italian village schoolgirl in a black pinafore holds her straw hat. Such photographs enter so deeply into the particular that they reveal to us the stream of a culture or a history which is flowing through that particular subject like blood. The images of these photographs, once seen, subsist in our mind until some actual incident, which we witness or live, refers to one of them as though to a more solid reality. But it is not this which makes Strand as a photographer unique.

His method as a photographer is more unusual. One could say that it was the antithesis to Henri Cartier-Bresson's. The photographic moment for Cartier-Bresson is an instant, a fraction of a second, and he stalks that instant as though it were a wild animal. The photographic moment for Strand is a biographical or historic moment, whose duration is ideally measured not by seconds but by its relation to a lifetime. Strand does not pursue an instant, but encourages a moment to arise as one might encourage a story to be told.

In practical terms this means that he decides what he wants before he takes the picture, never plays with the accidental, works slowly, hardly ever crops a picture, often still uses a plate camera, formally asks people to pose for him. His pictures are all remarkable for their intentionality. His portraits are very frontal. The subject is looking at us; we are looking at the subject; it has been arranged like that. But there is a similar sense of frontality in many of his other pictures of landscapes or objects or buildings. His camera is not free-roving. He chooses where to place it.

Where he has chosen to place it is not where something is about to happen, but where a number of happenings will be related. Thus, without any use of anecdote, he turns his subjects into narrators. The river narrates itself. The field

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where the horses are grazing recounts itself. The wife tells the story of her marriage. In each case Strand, the photographer, has chosen the place to put his camera as listener.

The approach: neo-realist. The method: deliberate, frontal, formal, with every surface thoroughly scanned. What is the result?



His best photographs are unusually dense — not in the sense of being over-burdened or obscure, but in the sense of being filled with an unusual amount of substance per square inch. And all this substance becomes the stuff of the life of the subject. Take the famous portrait of Mr Bennett from Vermont, New England. His jacket, his shirt, the stubble on his chin, the timber of the house behind, the air around him become in this image the face of his life, of which his actual facial expression is the concentrated spirit. It is the whole photograph, frowning, which surveys us.

PAUL STRAND

A Mexican woman sits against a wall. She has a woollen shawl over her head and shoulders and a broken plaited basket on her lap. Her skirt is patched and the wall behind her very shabby. The only fresh surface in the picture is that of her face. Once again, the surfaces we read with our eyes



become the actual chafing texture of her daily life; once again the photograph is a panel of her being. At first sight the image is soberly materialist, but just as her body wears through her clothes and the load in the basket wears away the basket, and passers-by have rubbed off the surface of the wall, so her being as a woman (her own existence for herself) begins, as one goes on looking at the picture, to rub through the materialism of the image.

A young Rumanian peasant and his wife lean against a wooden fence. Above and behind them, diffused in the light, is a field and, above that, a small modern house, totally insignificant as architecture, and the grey silhouette of a nondescript tree beside it. Here it is not the substantiality of surfaces which fills every square inch but a Slav sense of distance, a sense of plains or hills that continue indefinitely. And, once more, it is impossible to separate this quality from the presence of the two figures; it is there in the angle of his hat, the long extended movement of his arms, the flowers embroidered on her waistcoat, the way her hair is tied up; it is there across the width of their wide faces and mouths. What informs the whole photograph — space — is part of the skin of their lives.

These photographs depend upon Strand's technical skill, his ability to select, his knowledge of the places he visits, his eye, his sense of timing, his use of the camera; but he might have all these talents and still not be capable of producing such pictures. What has finally determined his success in his photographs of people and in his landscapes — which are only extensions of people who happen to be invisible — is his ability to invite the narrative: to present himself to his subject in such a way that the subject is willing to say: *I am as you see me.*

This is more complicated than it may seem. The present

tense of the verb *to be* refers only to the present; but nevertheless, with the first person singular in front of it, it absorbs the past which is inseparable from the pronoun. *I am* includes all that has made me so. It is more than a statement of immediate fact: it is already an explanation, a justification, a demand — it is already autobiographical. Strand's photographs suggest his sitters trust him to *see* their life story. And it is for this reason that, although the portraits are formal and posed, there is no need, either on the part of photographer or photograph, for the disguise of a borrowed role.

Photography, because it preserves the appearance of an event or a person, has always been closely associated with the idea of the historical. The ideal of photography, aesthetics apart, is to seize an "historic" moment. But Paul Strand's relation as a photographer to the historic is a unique one. His photographs convey a unique sense of duration. The *I am* is given its time in which to reflect on the past and to anticipate its future: the exposure time does no violence to the time of the *I am*: on the contrary, one has the strange impression that the exposure time *is* the lifetime.

1972

Uses of Photography

For Susan Sontag

I want to write down some of my responses to Susan Sontag's book *On Photography*. All the quotations I will use are from her text. The thoughts are sometimes my own, but all originate in the experience of reading her book.

The camera was invented by Fox Talbot in 1839. Within a mere 30 years of its invention as a gadget for an elite, photography was being used for police filing, war reporting, military reconnaissance, pornography, encyclopedic documentation, family albums, postcards, anthropological records (often, as with the Indians in the United States, accompanied by genocide), sentimental moralising, inquisitive probing (the wrongly named "candid camera"): aesthetic effects, news reporting and formal portraiture. The first cheap popular camera was put on the market, a little later, in 1888. The speed with which the possible uses of photography were seized upon is surely an indication of photography's profound, central applicability to industrial capitalism. Marx came of age the year of the camera's invention.

It was not, however, until the 20th century and the period between the two world wars that the photograph became the dominant and most "natural" way of referring to appearances. It was then that it replaced the world as immediate testimony. It was the period when photography was thought of as being most transparent, offering direct access to the real: the period of the great witnessing masters of the medium like Paul Strand and Walker Evans. It was, in the capitalist countries, the freest moment of photography: it had been liberated from the limitations of fine art, and it had become a public medium which could be used democratically.

Yet the moment was brief. The very "truthfulness" of the

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new medium encouraged its deliberate use as a means of propaganda. The Nazis were among the first to use systematic photographic propaganda.

"Photographs are perhaps the most mysterious of all the objects that make up and thicken the environment we recognise as modern. Photographs really are experience captured, and the camera is the ideal arm of consciousness in its acquisitive mood."

In the first period of its existence photography offered a new technical opportunity; it was an implement. Now, instead of offering new choices, its usage and its "reading" were becoming habitual, an unexamined part of modern perception itself. Many developments contributed to this transformation. The new film industry. The invention of the lightweight camera — so that the taking of a photograph ceased to be a ritual and became a "reflex". The discovery of photojournalism — whereby the text follows the pictures instead of vice versa. The emergence of advertising as a crucial economic force.

"Through photographs, the world becomes a series of unrelated, free-standing particles; and history, past and present, a set of anecdotes and *faits divers*. The camera makes reality atomic, manageable, and opaque. It is a view of the world which denies interconnectedness, continuity, but which confers on each moment the character of a mystery."

The first mass-media magazine was started in the United States in 1936. At least two things were prophetic about the launching of *Life*, the prophecies to be fully realised in the postwar television age. The new picture magazine was financed not by its sales, but by the advertising it carried. A third of its images were devoted to publicity. The second prophecy lay in its title. This is ambiguous. It may mean

that the pictures inside are about life. Yet it seems to promise more: that these pictures *are* life. The first photograph in the first number played on this ambiguity. It showed a newborn baby. The caption underneath read: "Life begins . . ."

What served in place of the photograph; before the camera's invention? The expected answer is the engraving, the drawing, the painting. The more revealing answer might be: memory. What photographs do out there in space was previously done within reflection.

"Proust somewhat misconstrues that photographs are, not so much an instrument of memory as an invention of it or a replacement."

Unlike any other visual image, a photograph is not a rendering, an imitation or an interpretation of its subject, but actually a trace of it. No painting or drawing, however naturalist, *belongs* to its subject in the way that a photograph does.

"A photograph is not only an image (as a painting is an image), an interpretation of the real; it is also a trace, something directly stencilled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask."

Human visual perception is a far more complex and selective process than that by which a film records. Nevertheless the camera lens and the eye both register images — because of their sensitivity to light — at great speed and in the face of an immediate event. What the camera does, however, and what the eye in itself can never do, is to *fix* the appearance of that event. It removes its appearance from the flow of appearances and it preserves it, not perhaps for ever but for as long as the film exists. The essential character of this preservation is not dependent upon the image being static; unedited film rushes preserve in

essentially the same way. The camera saves a set of appearances from the otherwise inevitable supercession of further appearances. It holds them unchanging. And before the invention of the camera nothing could do this, except, in the mind's eye, the faculty of memory.

I am not saying that memory is a kind of film. That is a banal simile. From the comparison film/memory we learn nothing about the latter. What we learn is how strange and unprecedented was the procedure of photography.

Yet, unlike memory, photographs do not in themselves preserve meaning. They offer appearances — with all the credibility and gravity we normally lend to appearances — prised away from their meaning. Meaning is the result of understanding functions. "And functioning takes place in time, and must be explained in time. Only that which narrates can make us understand." Photographs in themselves do not narrate. Photographs preserve instant appearances. Habit now protects us against the shock involved in such preservation. Compare the exposure time for a film with the life of the print made, and let us assume that the print only lasts ten years: the ratio for an average modern photograph would be approximately 20,000,000,000: 1. Perhaps that can serve as a reminder of the violence of the fission whereby appearances are separated by the camera from their function.

We must now distinguish between two quite distinct uses of photography. There are photographs which belong to private experience and there are those which are used publicly. The private photograph — the portrait of a mother, a picture of a daughter, a group photo of one's own team — is appreciated and read in a context *which is continuous with that from which the camera removed it*. (The violence of the removal is sometimes felt as incredulosity:

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“Was that really Dad?”) Nevertheless such a photograph remains surrounded by the meaning from which it was severed. A mechanical device, the camera has been used as an instrument to contribute to a living memory. The photograph is a memento from a life being lived.



The contemporary public photograph usually presents an event, a seized set of appearances, which has nothing to do with us, its readers, or with the original meaning of the event. It offers information, but information severed from all lived experience. If the public photograph contributes to a memory, it is to the memory of an unknowable and total stranger. The violence is expressed in that strangeness. It records an instant sight about which this stranger has shouted: Look!

Who is the stranger? One might answer: the photographer. Yet if one considers the entire use-system of photographed images, the answer of “the photographer” is clearly inadequate. Nor can one reply: those who use the

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photographs. It is because the photographs carry no certain meaning in themselves, because they are like images in the memory of a total stranger, that they lend themselves to any use.

Daumier’s famous cartoon of Nadar in his balloon suggests an answer. Nadar is travelling through the sky above Paris — the wind has blown off his hat — and he is photographing with his camera the city and its people below.

Has the camera replaced the eye of God? The decline of religion corresponds with the rise of the photograph. Has the culture of capitalism telescoped God into photography? The transformation would not be as surprising as it may at first seem.

The faculty of memory led men everywhere to ask

whether, just as they themselves could preserve certain events from oblivion, there might not be other eyes noting and recording otherwise unwitnessed events. Such eyes they then accredited to their ancestors, to spirits, to gods or to their single deity. What was seen by this supernatural eye was inseparably linked with the principle of justice. It was possible to escape the justice of men, but not this higher justice from which nothing or little could be hidden.

Memory implies a certain act of redemption. What is remembered has been saved from nothingness. What is forgotten has been abandoned. If all events are seen, instantaneously, outside time, by a supernatural eye, the distinction between remembering and forgetting is transformed into an act of judgment, into the rendering of justice, whereby recognition is close to *being remembered*, and condemnation is close to *being forgotten*. Such a presentiment, extracted from man's long, painful experience of time, is to be found in varying forms in almost every culture and religion, and, very clearly, in Christianity.

At first, the secularisation of the capitalist world during the 19th century elided the judgment of God into the judgment of History in the name of Progress. Democracy and Science became the agents of such a judgment. And for a brief moment, photography, as we have seen, was considered to be an aid to these agents. It is still to this historical moment that photography owes its ethical reputation as Truth.

During the second half of the 20th century the judgment of history has been abandoned by all except the underprivileged and dispossessed. The industrialised, "developed" world, terrified of the past, blind to the future, lives within an opportunism which has emptied the principle of justice of all credibility. Such opportunism turns

everything — nature, history, suffering, other people, catastrophes, sport, sex, politics — into spectacle. And the implement used to do this — until the act becomes so habitual that the conditioned imagination may do it alone — is the camera.

"Our very sense of situation is now articulated by the camera's interventions. The omnipresence of cameras persuasively suggests that time consists of interesting events, events worth photographing. This, in turn, makes it easy to feel that any event, once underway, and whatever its moral character, should be allowed to complete itself — so that something else can be brought into the world, the photograph."

The spectacle creates an eternal present of immediate expectation: memory ceases to be necessary or desirable. With the loss of memory the continuities of meaning and judgment are also lost to us. The camera relieves us of the burden of memory. It surveys us like God, and it surveys for us. Yet no other god has been so cynical, for the camera records in order to forget.

Susan Sontag locates this god very clearly in history. He is the god of monopoly capitalism.

"A capitalist society requires a culture based on images. It needs to furnish vast amounts of entertainment in order to stimulate buying and anaesthetise the injuries of class, race and sex. And it needs to gather unlimited amounts of information, the better to exploit the natural resources, increase productivity, keep order, make war, give jobs to bureaucrats. The camera's twin capacities, to subjectivise reality and to objectify it, ideally serve these needs and strengthen them. Cameras define reality in the two ways essential to the workings of an advanced industrial society:

as a spectacle (for masses) and as an object of surveillance (for rulers). The production of images also furnishes a ruling ideology. Social change is replaced by a change in images.”

Her theory of the current use of photographs leads one to ask whether photography might serve a different function. Is there an alternative photographic practice? The question should not be answered naively. Today no alternative professional practice (if one thinks of the profession of photographer) is possible. The system can accommodate any photograph. Yet it may be possible to begin to use photographs according to a practice addressed to an alternative future. This future is a hope which we need now, if we are to maintain a struggle, a resistance, against the societies and culture of capitalism.

Photographs have often been used as a radical weapon in posters, newspapers, pamphlets, and so on. I do not wish to belittle the value of such agitational publishing. Yet the current systematic public use of photography needs to be challenged, not simply by turning round like a cannon and aiming it at different targets, but by changing its practice. How?

We need to return to the distinction I made between the private and public uses of photography. In the private use of photography, the context of the instant recorded is preserved so that the photograph lives in an ongoing continuity. (If you have a photograph of Peter on your wall, you are not likely to forget what Peter means to you.) The public photograph, by contrast, is torn from its context, and becomes a dead object which, exactly because it is dead, lends itself to any arbitrary use.

In the most famous photographic exhibition ever organised, *The Family of Man* (put together by Edward Steichen in 1955), photographs from all over the world were

presented as though they formed a universal family album. Steichen’s intuition was absolutely correct: the private use of photographs can be exemplary for their public use. Unfortunately the shortcut he took in treating the existing class-divided world as if it were a family, inevitably made the whole exhibition, not necessarily each picture, sentimental and complacent. The truth is that most photographs taken of people are about suffering, and most of that suffering is man-made.

“One’s first encounter,” writes Susan Sontag, “with the photographic inventory of ultimate horror is a kind of revelation, the prototypically modern revelation: a negative epiphany. For me, it was photographs of Bergen-Belsen and Dachau which I came across by chance in a bookstore in Santa Monica in July 1945. Nothing I have seen — in photographs or in real life — ever cut me as sharply, deeply, instantaneously. Indeed, it seems plausible to me to divide my life into two parts, before I saw those photographs (I was twelve) and after, though it was several years before I understood fully what they were about.”

Photographs are relics of the past, traces of what has happened. If the living take that past upon themselves, if the past becomes an integral part of the process of people making their own history, then all photographs would re-acquire a living context, they would continue to exist in time, instead of being arrested moments. It is just possible that photography is the prophecy of a human memory yet to be socially and politically achieved. Such a memory would encompass any image of the past, however tragic, however guilty, within its own continuity. The distinction between the private and public uses of photography would be transcended. *The Family of Man* would exist.

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Meanwhile we live today in the world as it is. Yet this possible prophecy of photography indicates the direction in which any alternative use of photography needs to develop. The task of an alternative photography is to incorporate photography into social and political memory, instead of using it as a substitute which encourages the atrophy of any such memory.

The task will determine both the kinds of pictures taken and the way they are used. There can of course be no formulae, no prescribed practice. Yet in recognising how photography has come to be used by capitalism, we can define at least some of the principles of an alternative practice.

For the photographer this means thinking of her or himself not so much as a reporter to the rest of the world but, rather, as a recorder for those involved in the events photographed. The distinction is crucial.



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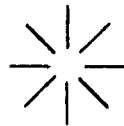


What makes these photographs so tragic and extraordinary is that, looking at them, one is convinced that they were not taken to please generals, to boost the morale of a civilian public, to glorify heroic soldiers or to shock the world press: they were images addressed to those suffering what they depict. And given this integrity towards and with their subject matter, such photographs later became a memorial, to the 20 million Russians killed in the war, for those who mourn them. (See *Russian War Photographs 1941 - 45*. Text by A. J. P. Taylor, London 1978.) The unifying horror of a total people's war made such an attitude on the part of the war photographers (and even the censors) a natural one. Photographers, however, can work with a similar attitude in less extreme circumstances.

The alternative use of photographs which already exist leads us back once more to the phenomenon and faculty of memory. The aim must be to construct a context for a photograph, to construct it with words, to construct it with other photographs, to construct it by its place in an ongoing text of photographs and images. How? Normally photographs are used in a very unilinear way — they are used to illustrate an argument, or to demonstrate a thought which goes like this:



Very frequently also they are used tautologically so that the photograph merely repeats what is being said in words. Memory is not unilinear at all. Memory works radially, that is to say with an enormous number of associations all leading to the same event. The diagram is like this:



If we want to put a photograph back into the context of experience, social experience, social memory, we have to respect the laws of memory. We have to situate the printed photograph so that it acquires something of the surprising conclusiveness of that which *was* and *is*.

What Brecht wrote about acting in one of his poems is applicable to such a practice. For *instant* one can read photography, for *acting* the re-creating of context:

So you should simply make the instant
Stand out, without in the process hiding
What you are making it stand out from.
Give your acting
That progression of one-thing-after-another,
that attitude of
Working up what you have taken on. In this way
You will show the flow of events and also the course
Of your work, permitting the spectator
To experience this Now on many levels, coming from
Previously and
Merging into Afterwards, also having much else Now
Alongside it. He is sitting not only
In your theatre but also
In the world.

There are a few great photographs which practically achieve this by themselves. But any photograph may become such a 'Now' if an adequate context is created for it. In general the better the photograph, the fuller the context which can be created.

Such a context replaces the photograph in time — not its own original time for that is impossible — but in narrated time. Narrated time becomes historic time when it is assumed by social memory and social action. The

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constructed narrated time needs to respect the process of memory which it hopes to stimulate.

There is never a single approach to something remembered. The remembered is not like a terminus at the end of a line. Numerous approaches or stimuli converge



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upon it and lead to it. Words, comparisons, signs need to create a context for a printed photograph in a comparable way; that is to say, they must mark and leave open diverse approaches. A radial system has to be constructed around the photograph so that it may be seen in terms which are simultaneously personal, political, economic, dramatic, everyday and historic.