On the Nature of Photography

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When a theorist of my persuasion looks at photography he is more concerned with the character traits of the medium as such than with the particular work of particular artists. He wishes to know what human needs are fulfilled by this kind of imagery, and what properties enable the medium to fulfill them. For his purpose, the theorist takes the medium at its best behavior. The promise of its potentialities captures him more thoroughly than the record of its actual achievements, and this makes him optimistic and tolerant, as one is with a child, who has a right to demand credit for his future. Analyzing media in this way requires a very different temperament than analyzing the use people make of them. Studies of this latter kind, given the deplorable state of our civilization, often make depressing reading.

The social critic, by his resentment and disapproval, is tied to the happenings and productions of the day, whereas the media analyst of my kind can display detachment. He, the media analyst, scrutinizes the passing crowd of the daily productions in the hope of an occasional catch, some hint at the true nature of the medium in an otherwise perhaps insignificant example, or even one of those rare and glorious fulfillments of the medium’s finest capacity. Not being a critic, he views photographs more as specimens than as individual creations, and he may not be up-to-date on the names of the latest promising newcomers. Perhaps the photographer can afford to have some sympathy for this remoteness, since, it seems to me, he too, although in a different sense, must practice his trade in an attitude of detachment.

This may seem a strange thing to say about a medium whose inextric-
Cable involvement with the settings and acts of practical behavior is one of its principal characteristics. Epitomized by the news photographers, the men and women of the camera invade the haunts of intimacy and privacy, and even the most visionary of photographers has no substitute for going in person to the place that will give shape to his dream. But precisely this intimate involvement with the subject matter necessitates the detachment of which I am speaking.

In the olden days, when a painter set up his easel at some corner to do a picture of the market square, he was an outsider, looked at with curiosity and awe, perhaps with amusement. It is the prerogative of the stranger to contemplate things instead of dealing with them. Apart from sometimes being bodily in the way, the painter did not interfere with the public private life around him. Nobody felt spied upon or even observed unless he or she was sitting quietly on a bench, for it was evident that the painter was looking at and putting down something other than the facts of the moment. Only the moment is private, and the painter looked right through the coming and going at something that was not there at all because it was always there. The painting denounced nobody in particular.

In the portrait studio again, a different social code protected both participants. The sitter, his spontaneity suspended and his best appearance displayed, invited scrutiny. The amenities of intercourse were abrogated, there was no need for conversation, and the I was fully authorized to stare at the Thou as though it were an It. This was true for the early phase of photography as well. The equipment was too bulky to catch anybody unawares, and the exposure time was long enough to wipe the accidents of the moment from face and gesture. Hence the enviable timelessness of the early photographs. A sort of otherworldly wisdom was symbolized by the fact that any momentary motion vanished automatically from those metallic plates.

Later, when photography drew the stylistic consequences from the technique of instantaneous exposure, it began to define its objective in a way that was totally new in the history of the visual arts. Whatever the style and purpose of art, its goal had always been the representation of the lasting character of things and actions. Even when depicting motion, it was the abiding nature of that motion which the artist portrayed. This
remained true also for the paintings of the nineteenth century, although we are accustomed to saying that the impressionists cultivated the fleeting moment. If one looks carefully one realizes that those contemporaries of the first generations of photographers were not intent primarily on replacing scenes of some permanence with quickly passing ones. It was not a matter of duration. Rather one might say that they supplemented the fundamental attitudes of the human mind and body—the expression of thought and sorrow, of care and love and repose and attack—with the more extrinsic gestures of daily behavior and that they found a new significance in them. They often replaced the root stance of the classical poses with a more casual slouch or stretch or yawn, or the steady illumination of a scene with a twinkling one. But if one compares those washerwomen, midinettes, or boulevardiers, those smoke-filled railroad yards or milling street crowds with photographic snapshots, one realizes that, for the most part, even those "momentary" poses had none of the incompleteness of the fraction of a second lifted from the context of time. In terms of time, a Degas ballerina fastening her shoulder strap is just as collected and reposes as firmly as the winged goddess of victory untying her sandal on a marble relief of ancient Athens.

The same is true for many photographs. But it is not true for the typical snapshot, and the snapshot quality of photographs manifests a unique character trait of the medium. Photography does something unheard-of when it catches motion in the act. The accidental shape of its appearance reveals the snapshot as a fragment, a sample extirpated from an action whose integrity resides beyond the realm of the picture. If one compares Degas's dancers with a photograph of a similar subject it is evident that the attitudes of the painted figures, although brought about by a trifling occupation, have an almost classical finality, whereas in the photograph the tensely open mouth and the placement of the fingers applying the makeup rely for their visual validity on the action of which they are a phase. (See pp. 152–53.)

Photography reaches into the world as an intruder, and therefore it also creates a disturbance, just as in the physics of light the single photon at the atomic level upsets the facts on which it reports. The photographer takes a hunter's pride in capturing the spontaneity of life without leaving traces of his presence. News reporters enjoy recording the uncontrolled fatigue or embarrassment of a public figure, and the photographic manuals never tire of warning the amateur against the frozen poses of the family lined up for their picture in front of some famous landmark. Animals and infants, the prototypes of unselfconsciousness, are the darlings of the trade. But the need for such precaution and trickery highlights the congenital problem of photography: inevitably
the photographer is a part of the situation he depicts. A court order may be necessary to keep him away, and the more skillfully he hides and surprises, the more acute is the social problem he creates. It is in this connection that we should think of the irresistible fascination which photography, film, and video have for young people today.

Only a malicious observer would unduly emphasize the fact that the opportunity to produce acceptable pictures without much training, toil, or talent is tempting in itself. More relevantly, it can be noted that if someone opts for the camera he may be demonstrating against form. Form is the characteristic distinction of all traditional art. Form is suspected of serving the establishment, of detracting from the raw impact of passions and dreams psychologically, and from injustice, brutality, and deprivation politically and socially. In reply to such accusations, one can only say that good form, far from emasculating the message, is, on the contrary, the only way of making it accessible to the mind. We need
only glance at the work of a great social photographer such as Dorothea Lange to realize the forceful eloquence of form. On the other side, the kind of current video work which records interviews, debates, and other events without sufficient control of perspective, light, and camera movement proves negatively that the gray evasiveness of the noncommittal image sabotages communication.

Form is unavoidable. However, the way in which photographs are taken reminds us furthermore that there is not only form of observation but also form of action. In the other arts, the problem of how to reconcile these two arises only indirectly. Should the poet write revolutionary hymns at home or mount the barricade in person? In photography, there is no geographic escape from the conflict. The photographer must be present where the action is. It is true that limiting oneself to observing and recording in the midst of battle, destruction, and tragedy may require as much courage as does participation; however, when one takes pictures one also transforms life and death into a spectacle to be watched with detachment. This is what I meant to suggest in the beginning: the
detachment of the artist becomes more of a problem in the photographic media precisely because they immerse him bodily in situations that call for human solidarity. In a broader sense, photography serves as an effective instrument of activist revelation, but at the same time it enables a person to be busy in the midst of things without having to take part, and to overcome alienation bodily without having to give up detachment. Self-deception comes easy in the twilight of such ambiguous conditions (Sontag 1973).

So far I have mentioned two phases in the development of photography: the early period during which the image, as it were, transcended the momentary presence of the portrayed objects because of the length of exposure and the bulkiness of the equipment; and the second phase, which exploited the technical possibility of capturing motion in a fraction of time. The ambition of instantaneous photography, I noted, was that of preserving the spontaneity of action and avoiding any indication that the presence of the picture taker had a modifying influence on what was going on. Characteristically enough, however, our own century has discovered a new attraction in the very artificiality of picture taking and endeavored to use it deliberately for the symbolic representation of an age that has fallen from innocence. This stylistic trend has two main aspects: the introduction of surrealist apparitions, and the frank acknowledgment of photography as an exposure.

By its very nature, surrealism depended on the trompe l’oeil illusion of the settings it presented. Here the painter has a powerful competitor in the photographer, for, although the incisive presence of realistically painted images is not easily matched by the camera, a photograph has an authenticity from which painting is barred by birth. Fashion photography may have started the trend by showing in the midst of an authentic setting, on a hotel terrace at the Riviera or on the Spanish Steps in Rome, a grotesquely stylized model, the body reduced to a scaffold and the face to a mask, in a deliberately angular pose. Startling though such apparitions in the public domain were for a while, they looked too obviously like artifacts truly to stir the sense of the superreal. They were more like pranks than like creations of the bona fide world; and only as an outgrowth of reality can apparitions work their spell. A surrealist shiver was more effectively produced by the more recent practice of photographing nude figures in a forest or living room or abandoned cottage. Here was indubitably real human flesh, but since such appearances of nude figures were known only from the visions of painters, the reality of the scene was transfigured into a dream—pleasant perhaps but also frightening because it invaded the mind as a hallucination.

I referred to still another way in which photographers of our time
have exploited the artificiality of their medium. Not by accident perhaps, it is often in documentary reportage that we see persons acknowledging the presence of the photographer, either by displaying themselves for him cheerfully or ceremoniously, or by watching him with suspicious attention. What we seem to be shown here is man and woman after they have eaten from the tree of knowledge. "And the eyes of them both were opened," says the Book of Genesis, "and they knew that they were naked." This is man under observation, in need of a persona, concerned with his image, exposed to danger or to the prospect of great fortune by simply being looked at.

All I have said derives ultimately from the fundamental peculiarity of the photographic medium: the physical objects themselves print their image by means of the optical and chemical action of light. This fact has always been acknowledged but treated in a variety of different ways by the writers on the subject. I am thinking back to my own way of dealing with the psychology and aesthetics of the film in Film als Kunst (Arnhem 1932). In that early book I attempted to refute the accusation that photography was nothing but a mechanical copy of nature. Such an approach was suggested as a reaction to the narrow notion that had prevailed ever since Baudelaire in his famous statement of 1859 predicted the value of photography for the faithful documentation of sights and scientific facts, but also denounced it as an act of a revengeful god who, by sending Daguerre as his messiah, granted the prayer of a vulgar multitude that wanted art to be an exact imitation of nature (Baudelaire 1859). In those early days, the mechanical procedure of photography was doubly suspect as an attempt by industry to replace the manual work of the artist with a mass production of cheap pictures. Such critical voices, although less eloquent, were still influential when I decided upon my own apologia for the cinema. The strategy was therefore to describe the differences between the images we obtain when we look at the physical world and the images perceived on the motion picture screen. These differences could then be shown to be a source of artistic expression.

In a sense it was a negative approach because it defended the new medium by measuring it according to the standards of the traditional ones, that is, by pointing to the range of interpretation it offered to the artist, very much like painting and sculpture, in spite of its mechanical nature. Only secondarily was I concerned with the positive virtues that photography derives precisely from the mechanical quality of its images. Even so, the demonstration was necessary then, and perhaps it is worth being remembered now—at least, to judge from one of the best known and also one of the more confusing statements of recent years, Roland Barthes's paper on Le message photographique (1961). Barthes calls the photograph a perfect and absolute analogue, derived from the physical
object by reduction but not by transformation. If this statement means anything at all, the meaning must be that the primary photographic image is nothing but a faithful copy of the object and that any elaboration or interpretation is secondary. To me, it seems necessary to keep insisting that an image cannot transmit its message unless it acquires form at its primary level.

Pictures produced by a camera can resemble paintings or drawings in presenting recognizable images of physical objects. But they have also characteristics of their own, of which the following two are relevant here: first, the photograph acquires some of its unique visual properties through the technique of mechanical recording; and second, it supplies the viewer with a specific kind of experience, which depends on his being aware of the picture's mechanical origin. To put it more simply: (1) the picture is coproduced by nature and man and in some ways looks strikingly like nature, and (2) the picture is viewed as something made by nature. The distinction between these two characteristics matters whenever the viewer is sophisticated enough to realize the difference between an image and the objects it represents. A primitive tribesman or peasant knows that the effigy he worships is not materially identical with the god or saint, but he treats it as though it actually were that superior power, and he does not acknowledge the qualities introduced by the judgment and skill of the image maker. For the purposes of modern man these differences count. Regardless of whether he is actually aware of any particular qualities that distinguish a photograph from a hand-made painting, his conviction that the picture was generated by a camera profoundly influences the way he views and uses it. This point has been stressed by the film critic André Bazin (1945).

In addition, however, a sensitive observer may appreciate certain significant visual differences between shapes produced by a lens in a photographic emulsion and others created by a painter's brush, although in principle he may know nothing about the technical conditions of origin to which these differences are due. These properties of the photographic image are brought to our attention if we apply the principle on which Siegfried Kracauer based his treatment of the subject. I want to say a little more about both characteristics of our medium.

Photography, observed Bazin in 1945, profits from the absence of man while all other arts are based on his presence. "Photography affects us like a phenomenon in nature, like a flower or a snowflake whose vegetable or earthly origins are an inseparable part of their beauty" (1945, p. 13). Looking in a museum at a Flemish tavern scene, we are interested in what objects the painter introduced and which occupations he gave his characters. Only indirectly do we use his picture as a
documentary testimony on what life was like in the seventeenth century. How different is the attitude in which we approach a photograph showing, say, a lunch counter! “Where was this taken?” we want to know. The word “caliente” that we discover on the list of foods in the background of the picture points to a Spanish element, but the paunchy policeman at the door, the hot dogs and the orange drinks assure us that we are in the United States. With the delighted curiosity of the tourist we explore the scene. The glove near the wastepaper basket must have been dropped by a customer; it was not placed there by an artist as a compositional touch. We are on vacation from artifice. Also the different attitude toward time is characteristic. “When was this painted?” means mostly that we want to know to which stage of the artist’s life the work belongs. “When was this taken?” means typically that we are concerned with the historical locus of the subject. Is it a view of Chicago from before the great fire? Or did Chicago look that way after 1871?

In evaluating the documentary qualities of a photograph we ask three questions: Is it authentic? Is it correct? Is it true? Authenticity, vouched for by certain features and uses of the picture, requires that the scene has not been tampered with. The masked burglar leaving the bank is not posed, the clouds are not printed from another negative, the lion is not taken in front of a painted oasis. Correctness is another matter; it calls for the assurance that the picture corresponds to what the camera took: the colors are not off, the lens does not distort the proportions. Truth, finally, does not deal with the picture as a statement about what was present in front of the camera but refers to the depicted scene as a statement about facts the picture is supposed to convey. We ask whether the picture is characteristic of what it purports to show. A photograph may be authentic but untrue, or true though inauthentic. When in Jean Genet’s play The Balcony a photographer of the queen sends one of the arrested revolutionaries to get him a pack of cigarettes and pays a police officer to shoot the man, the picture of the rebel killed while trying to escape is inauthentic but probably correctly taken and not necessarily untrue. “Monstreux!” says the queen. “C’est dans les habitudes, Majesté,” says the photographer. To be sure, when it comes to truth the problem is no longer specifically photographic.

One can understand why Bazin suggested that the essential factor of photography “is not to be found in the result achieved but in the way of achieving it” (1945, p. 12). It is equally important, however, to consider what the mechanical recording process does to the visual qualities of the photographic image. Here we are helped by Siegfried Kracauer, who based his book Theory of Film on the observation that the photographic image is a kind of compromise product between physical reality as it impresses its own optical image on the film and the picture maker's
ability to select, shape, and organize the raw material (1960). The opti-
cally projected image, Kracauer suggested, is characterized by the visual
accidents of a world that has not been created for the convenience of the
photographer, and it would be a mistake to force these unwieldy data of
reality into the straitjacket of pictorial composition. Indefiniteness, end-
lessness, random arrangement should be considered legitimate and in-
deed necessary qualities of film as a photographic product. If, with
Kracauer's observation in mind, we look attentively at the texture of a
typical photographic image we find, perhaps to our surprise, that the
subject matter is represented mostly by visual hints and approximations.
In a successful painting or drawing every stroke of the pen, every touch
of color, is an intentional statement of the artist about shape, space,
volume, unity, separation, lighting, etc. The texture of the pictorial
image amounts to a pattern of explicit information. If we approach
photographs with an expectation trained by the perusal of handmade
images we find that the work of the camera lets us down. Shapes peter
out in muddy darkness, volumes are elusive, streaks of light arrive from
nowhere, neighboring items are not clearly connected or separate, de-
tails do not add up. The fault is ours, of course, because we are looking
at the photograph as though it were made and controlled by man and
not as a mechanical deposit of light. As soon as we take the picture for
what it is, it hangs together and may even be beautiful.

But surely there is a problem here. If what I affirmed earlier is true, it
takes definite form to make a picture readable. How, then, can an ag-
glomerate of vague approximations deliver its message? To speak of
"reading" a picture is appropriate but dangerous at the same time be-
cause it suggests a comparison with verbal language, and linguistic
analogies, although fashionable, have greatly complicated our under-
standing of perceptual experiences everywhere. I will refer here once
more to the article of Roland Barthes (1961), in which the photographic
image is described as coded and uncoded at the same time. The underly-
ing assumption is that a message can be understood only when its content
has been processed into the discontinuous, standardized units of a lan-
guage, of which verbal writing, signal codes, or musical notation are
examples. Pictorial surfaces, being continuous and unstandardized in
their elements, are therefore uncoded, and this is said to mean unread-
able. (This observation, of course, holds for paintings as well as for
photographs.) How, then, do we gain access to pictures? By making the
subject matter conform, says Barthes, to another kind of code, not in-
herent in the picture itself but imposed by society as a set of standardized
meanings upon certain objects and actions. Barthes gives the example of
a photograph depicting a writer's study: an open window with a view of
tiled roofs, a landscape of vineyards; in front of the window a table with
an album of photographs, a magnifying lens, a vase of flowers. Such an
arrangement of objects, asserts Barthes, is nothing more or less than a lexicon of concepts whose standardized meanings can be read off like a description in words.

It will be evident that such an interpretation denies the very substance of visual imagery, namely, its capacity to convey meaning by full perceptual experience. The standardized designations of things are nothing but the husks of information. By reducing the message to meager conceptual fare one accepts the impoverished practical responses of modern man in the street as the prototype of human vision. In opposition to this approach we must maintain that imagery can fulfill its unique function—whether photographic or pictorial, artistic or informational—only if it goes beyond a set of standardized symbols and exerts the full and ultimately inexhaustible individuality of its appearance.1

If, however, we are correct in asserting that the messages conveyed by pictures cannot be reduced to a sign language, then our problem of how to read them is still with us. Here we need to realize, first of all, that a picture is “continuous” only when we scan it mechanically with a photometer. Human perception is no such recording instrument. Visual perception is pattern perception; it organizes and structures the shapes offered by the optical projections in the eye. These organized shapes, not sets of conventional ideographs, yield the visual concepts that make pictures readable. They are the keys that give us access to the rich complexity of the image.

When the viewer looks at the world around him, these shapes are delivered to him entirely by the physical objects out there. In a photograph, the shapes are selected, partially transformed, and treated by the picture taker and his optical and chemical equipment. Thus, in order to make sense of photographs one must look at them as encounters between physical reality and the creative mind of man—not simply as a reflection of that reality in the mind but as a middle ground on which the two formative powers, man and world, meet as equal antagonists and partners, each contributing its particular resources. What I described earlier in negative terms as a lack of formal precision must be valued positively from the point of view of the photographic medium as the manifest presence of authentic physical reality, whose irrational, incom-

1. Ironically, not even a verbal message is coded, only the means of conveying it. Words are discontinuous signs, reasonably well standardized, but the message they transmit consists in the image that induced the sender to verbalize and is resurrected by the words in the mind of the recipient. This image, whatever precisely its nature, is as “continuous” as any photograph or painting. What comes across when a person is told “There has been a fire!” consists neither of five verbal units nor is it standardized.
pletely defined aspects challenge the image-maker's desire for visually articulate form. This unshaped quality of the optical raw material exerts its influence not only when the viewer recognizes the objects that have been projected on the sensitive coating of the film but is actually more manifest in highly abstract photographs in which objects have been reduced to pure shapes.

Even so, a medium that limits the creations of the mind by powerful material constraints must have corresponding limitations. In fact, when the artistic development of photography from the days of David Octavius Hill to the great photographers of our own time is compared with the range of painting from Manet to, say, Jackson Pollock, or of music from Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* to, say, Arnold Schönberg, we may come to the conclusion that there has been photographic work of high quality but consistently limited in its range of expression as well as in the depth of its insights. The photographic medium seems to operate under a definite ceiling. To be sure, every artistic medium limits the range of successful expression and needs to do so. But there is a difference between the productive limitations that intensify the statement by confining it to a few formal dimensions and a narrowing of expressive freedom within the range of a particular medium.

If this diagnosis is correct, I think the difference is not due to the relative youth of the photographic art but to its intimate physical connection with the activities of human life. I would also suggest that this is a liability when looked at from the point of view of the painter, the composer, or the poet, but it is an enviable privilege when we consider its function in human society. Let us consult another medium of artistic expression, one of the most ancient but equally bound to physical conditions, namely, the dance. Here too we seem to find that, when we compare the dances of remote times and places to our own, the resemblance outweighs the difference, and the visions conveyed, though beautiful and impressive, remain at a relatively simple level. This is so, I believe, because the dance is essentially a ritualized extension of the expressive and rhythmical movement of the human body in its daily activities, its mental manifestations and communications. As such it lacks the almost unconditional freedom of imagination granted to the other media, but it is also spared the remoteness that separates the great private visions of the poets, composers, or painters from the commerce of social existence.

Perhaps the same is true for photography. Wedded to the physical nature of landscape and human settlement, animal and man, to our exploits, sufferings, and joys, photography is privileged to help man view himself, expand and preserve his experiences, and exchange vital communications—a faithful instrument whose reach need not extend farther than that of the way of life it reflects.
Works Cited


