

Towards An Anthropology Of Photography

TOWARDS AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF PHOTOGRAPHY:
FRAMEWORKS OF ANALYSIS

by

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Arts
Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
McGill University, Montreal

Department of Anthropology
August, 1978

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M.A. Thesis

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ABSTRACT

The evolution of photography during the 19th and 20th centuries poses a major subject for aesthetic and cultural analysis. Social documentary photography's role and function have been structured by the "global society" which characterizes the modern era. The image is seen as fulfilling a pseudo-anthropological function in mediating between the photographer's society and 'other' peoples. Three aesthetic-cultural models are advanced to explain this process: Realism, the Documentary and Primitivism. Primitivism, as the model which best reflects the ideology of the modern era and the promise of aesthetic transformation, is seen as the dominant framework for structuring the creation, perception and role of the image. In transforming living cultural communities into art, photography creates a category of 'Others' which reflects and reinforces cultural assumptions about the nature of man and culture. This raises questions about the ethical implications of art and culture theory.

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RESUME

L'évolution de la photographie pendant les 19^e et 20^e siècles présente un objet d'importance majeure pour l'analyse esthétique et culturelle. La "société globale" qui caractérise l'ère moderne a structuré le rôle et la fonction de la photographie documentaire à sujet social. L'image semble jouer un rôle pseudo-anthropologique, étant un médiateur entre la société du photographe et les autres. Nous présentons ici trois modèles pour expliquer les aspects esthétiques et culturels de ce processus: le réalisme, le documentaire et le primitivisme. Le primitivisme, qui représente le mieux l'idéologie de l'ère moderne et l'espoir d'une transformation esthétique, apparaît comme le schéma dominant dans la structuration de la création, de la perception et du rôle de l'image. En transformant des communautés culturelles vivantes en productions artistiques, la photographie crée la catégorie des 'autres' qui reflète et soutient les idées acquises à propos de la nature de l'homme et de la culture. Ceci soulève des questions à propos des implications morales de l'art et des théories de la culture.

PREFACE

A good number of the ideas in this study have already appeared in earlier papers which are not cited in the body of the thesis in order to make for easier reading although they are listed for bibliographic reference [see Kolodny 1974, 1975a, 1975b]. This material has been in the public domain for some time, and feedback from colleagues has been a valuable source of ideas and encouragement.

I wish to acknowledge two Summer Research Grants from McGill University and my advisor, Carmen Lambert, for assistance in preparing this thesis. Harvey Feit and Peter Ohlin, members of my committee, are greatly thanked for their interest, encouragement and advice. Jérôme Rousseau translated the abstract and volunteered needed guidance about rules and procedures.

The Museum of Modern Art, New York City, granted me special access to their photography library and Stanley Triggs, curator of the Notman Archives, McCord Museum, Montreal provided kind assistance in my search through the literature.

Special thanks go to Bill Ewing of Galerie Optica, Montreal for giving me the opportunity to present a lecture and visual presentation of my ideas on "The Cultural Lens" to an audience of photographers.

Ben Fernández of The New School for Social Research provided my entree to Michael Abramson, Philip Dante and Bruce Davidson of New York City. To all of these photographers I am especially grateful for their interest, time and willingness to be interviewed about their work. Their enthusiasm for a study of photography by an 'outsider' was one of my greatest sources of support. I hope that this thesis will be of some value to them, and to the other photographers who have encouraged my work, in their pursuit of the elusive image.

Above all, to my family and friends and teaching colleagues who have provided, as always, love, advice and encouragement, I say: we did it.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Purpose

The general purpose of this thesis is to explore the ideological foundations, methodology and goals of social documentary photography. It is argued that this art form has functioned as a kind of cultural mediation or cultural brokerage, with photographers working and being seen as pseudo-anthropologists. By taking as their main subject the culturally different and culturally marginal, photographers have served as mediators between their own culture (or sub-culture) and other cultures (or sub-cultures). This phenomenon is examined within the context of the broader ideological currents of Western Europe and North America since the mid-eighteenth century, as revealed through the history of photography, and the conditions of aesthetic phenomena and experience within the cultural system.

Photography is seen as having effected a very unique transformation of reality into aesthetic phenomena. In the process of transforming cultural realities into art, it has created a photographic anthropology. The communication of theories about the nature of man and culture has given the photograph a significant role in shaping our perception and understanding of humanity during modern times.

Finally, the photographic image is seen as a particularly appropriate medium to rise to prominence in an era torn between the felt need to explore and control its widening world while at the same time wishing to keep it at a safe distance. Through the image, both could be achieved. In performing this role, however, photographers have not served passively. They have metamorphosed their subjects according to constraints set down by the nature of the image, the conditions set down by the cultural network for first defining and then dealing with aesthetic phenomena, and the dominant ideologies¹ of the modern era. And, it is argued, they have generally served their function well.

¹'Ideology' is defined for the purpose of this thesis as a body of concepts (consciously or unconsciously used) which structures the perception of reality, and thereby the knowledge, beliefs and actions which are characteristic of a social environment during an historically defined period.

Background and Setting

This thesis has developed from a variety of concerns. Seeing things from the framework of anthropology, I have been intrigued by the treatment of social documentary images and their makers in our society. It seems particularly appropriate that anthropology, often called a 'mirror for man,' should examine how photographers have seen and shaped the human experience. From the daguerreotypes of the mid-eighteenth century, with their literally mirror-like surface, to the photographs of the 1970's man has been caught by the photographic imagination.

It seems of special significance that documentary photography has focused most often on those who are the subjects of anthropological discourse: people who are culturally different or culturally and economically marginal. I can recall several instances in which photographers were interviewed after having completed a two or three week stint at image-making in some foreign locale. After a few questions about camera technique, the interviewer would turn to the experience of the photographer in an 'exotic' milieu, and then the inevitable question: "What is culture 'X' really like?" Very interesting. A man or woman, with camera, spends a few weeks in a different cultural setting and is seen as an authority on culture. Is there something about the photographic image that

bestows such authority on its maker as an extension of its own perceived documentary powers? Is our society so hungry for a sense of first-hand knowledge about the world that the photographer, as one who has 'been there' — the image providing ultimate proof — suits our needs for vicarious participation in other societies? These are some of the questions which have motivated this study.

This situation appeared to me to need placement in the larger context of the issues which are behind the creation and perception of art in general, if not of all human endeavor: what is the nature of reality and, by extension, what is the nature (or reality) of man? I felt that photography, as an art form, stands in a special relationship to the 'real' or empirical world. It has been a unique method for transforming people-as-cultural-beings into art objects and thereby fostering a kind of aesthetic imperialism. It has also played a rather unique role in seeming to be able to satisfy our desire to know the world in its appearances and in its essences; not only to capture the look of things but to reveal their essential nature. This is the role we have given to photography and, as such, we have conceded to the image qualities which we, the viewers, bring to the image. This last point is not often enough recognized. As this thesis will attempt to demonstrate, it is not the camera which captures the 'real' but we ourselves who attempt to make

it do so. In order to analyse the role of social documentary photography we must make explicit the specific qualities of the image, the ideologies which have formed its production, its use and its perception as seen within the context of aesthetic phenomena and the broader cultural system, and the methodology which photographers use to work through the process which results in the image.

Methodology

The material for this thesis has been gathered almost entirely through library research. During the summer of 1972 several New York City-based photographers were interviewed at length about their work and their feelings about the photographic enterprise. These interviews were originally meant to provide detailed case study material which would illustrate the theoretical framework. Over time, however, the choice was made to write a predominantly theoretical study and this data was set aside (reluctantly). While very little from these interviews has been included here, the information and insights were invaluable to my understanding of the photographer's own perception of his work. These photographers also guided me to relevant literature which would have otherwise remained unknown to someone outside of the photographic network.

The literature for this study has been selected from the fields of anthropology, philosophy, photography, and art and culture history. Because of the relatively small body of critical writings on photography along with the general lack of interest in the area on the part of social scientists, many areas of research had to be consulted. The thesis is therefore, of necessity, the product of interdisciplinary research. I have tried to

construct the analysis in order to meet the demands and complexities of the topic rather than to conform to the dictates of any single theoretical position. The work done in the following pages is therefore considered to be a broad and exploratory approach to the subject and an introduction to the potential research to be carried on in the field.

This thesis has been formed by the guiding premise of anthropological inquiry: that man and his activities can be most fully understood by a study which is both wholistic and contextual. It has been equally motivated by those canons of philosophical thought which argue that radical inquiry, getting at the roots and presuppositions, is the best method for critical understanding. These two principles have constantly been at work, guiding the making of this thesis.

The Anthropological Literature

The subject of this thesis is an art form which originated in and grew out of the experience of complex societies and is therefore a departure from the mainstream of research done in anthropology. As a result, the anthropological literature dealing with art and visual media mentioned below has only been relevant and contributed to this study indirectly.

Anthropology and Art

The work of anthropologists in the fields of art and aesthetics has been largely confined to studies of the traditional art forms of small-scale societies. Exceptions to this would include the literature on "tourist art" [see Graburn 1976], Peacock's study of urban theatre (LUDRUK) in Java [1968], and Fabian and Fabian's current research on popular, Western influenced painting in Zaire [1976]. While these studies can be considered novel insofar as they have looked at non-traditional or Western influenced art, they still reflect the focus of the discipline on small-scale or non-Western cultures. They do, however, practice a more historical approach to the subject than found in most of the traditional ethnographic studies of art.

The work of Jacques Maquet in his essay Introduction to Aesthetic Anthropology [1971] has been influential in formulating the theoretical framework of this thesis. Maquet's study is a significant contribution to the anthropological literature because of his examination of the nature of aesthetic experience itself; his interest in aesthetic phenomena in complex societies; his presentation of a general schema for dealing with aesthetic phenomena as part of the cultural system; and his formulation of hypotheses which encourage further research. This kind of broad and interdisciplinary approach to the study of aesthetic phenomena within an anthropological perspective is followed in this thesis.

Anthropology and Visual Media

The anthropological literature on visual media has generally centred around four themes: 1) the use and nature of ethnographic film [see Ruby 1975; Heider 1976]; 2) the use of photography as a research and recording method in anthropology [see Collier 1967; Ruby 1976]; 3) the nature of visual perception and communication, especially in a cross-cultural context [see Forge 1970; Worth and Adair 1972]; and 4) the study of non-professional or "home-mode" photography and film as a social activity and form of expressive and communicative behaviour in the North American family (or non-public) context [see Chalfen

1975a, 1975b]. In the case of the first two categories, we are talking about the use of media for or in anthropology. In the third, we find that visual media is used to some degree as an evocative device to learn about perception and cognition. The fourth category represents a study of media in the private domain, with an emphasis on its structured use in small group settings.

This brief listing cannot do justice to the wealth of interesting and innovative material in these studies. Particularly in the works of Ruby, Worth and Adair, and Chalfen there are valuable discussions on the structure of the visual image in relationship to the construction of meaning by the maker and viewer.

The difference between this literature and the present study is, in general, that I am focusing on photography itself, as a part of the art/aesthetic domain and as a 'professional' activity which has evolved during a specific historical period. The work of the anthropologists discussed above has not taken this area of research as a dominant concern. While there are potential linkages between this literature and the material covered in the following pages they are referred to only briefly as they are generally beyond the scope of this study.

Organization

In this chapter I have set out the background, premises, general goals and main arguments of the thesis, and have included a brief discussion of related anthropological literature. While this introduces the general ideas and motivation behind an anthropological study of social documentary photography, introductions provided at the beginning of each chapter will give the reader more specific guidelines. Chapter 2 presents the theoretical framework which lays the foundation for an analysis of photography as aesthetic phenomena in the cultural system. In Chapter 3 the cultural and historical setting of photography is introduced. Three models are then presented which, it is argued, have grown out of this setting and have guided both the production and perception of photography. The source materials for these models are identified. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 are then devoted to a detailed description of each model and its effect on photography: Realism, the Documentary and Primitivism, respectively. Because of the prominence given to the role of Primitivism in shaping photography, Chapter 6 is expanded to include a discussion of the anthropological implications of this model as seen in specific photographic works. Chapter 7 concludes the thesis, elaborates on its findings, and suggests further directions for research.

CHAPTER 2

ART AND THE METAMORPHOSIS OF REALITY

Introduction

This chapter sets down a general framework of art and aesthetic experience which must precede any analysis of social documentary photography as a specific art form. The conditions and features of aesthetic experience and phenomena as described in the following pages are considered to apply to photography as it is delimited in this thesis. While photographic images appear in 'non-art' contexts (e. g. newspapers, popular magazines, family photo albums) this use of photography is not the concern of this study and is therefore not subject to the arguments made below.

Briefly, then, this chapter advances theories for defining the place of the aesthetic domain in the broader cultural system, the quality of aesthetic experience, and the manner by which phenomena (including objects, people and events) are transformed or metamorphosed into the aesthetic domain. The main concern here is to stress the fact that the nature and function of aesthetic experience and aesthetic phenomena are determined in a dialectical relationship with everyday reality. They neither arise spontaneously nor independently but rather are the creations of the cultural experiences and systems in which they are imbedded.

Aesthetic Phenomena in the Cultural System

All aesthetic phenomena and experience are inevitably cultural, or embedded in cultural processes. Jacques Maquet in Introduction to Aesthetic Anthropology [1971] has given a description of this situation which will be briefly summarized below.

According to Maquet, we may conceptualize culture as set up on horizontal and vertical axes. On the horizontal axis we have three levels: 1) processes of production, 2) societal networks, and 3) ideational configurations [1971: 19-23]. Aesthetic phenomena, as do other cultural features, cut vertically through these layers. They form a subsystem at each level which is separate although not isolated from other cultural phenomena [1971: 23]. Thus, on the ideational level, aesthetic ideas may be similar to those expressed in political ideology. At the level of societal networks, artists may participate in guild-like organizations, attend graduate schools, etc. In terms of the processes of production, artists produce objects and sell their work to galleries and book publishers. Thus aesthetic ideology, activity and products are not 'above' or outside of the cultural system.

The relationships described above would constitute

what Maquet calls consistency relationships [1971: 27-29]. Such cultural consistency is the norm across the ideational level of culture (e. g. where the ideology expressed in art and politics would tend towards a parallelism, or correspondence) as well as along all the horizontal and vertical axes of a cultural system. Thus aesthetic phenomena whether in regard to ideology, social structure, or production would tend to function in accord with prevailing cultural rules and patterns. In basic terms, this is to say that they operate with the same orientation to reality which is consistent in and distinctive to any cultural system as a whole.

On the ideational level of a culture, aesthetic configurations reflect the vital experiences of men confronting the physical and social environment. They are "vertically" consistent with basic experiences because they visually symbolize them. They are also "horizontally" consistent with other ideational configurations because the latter also reflect the same existential experiences in their own idioms. [Maquet 1971: 32]

If it is accepted that such consistency relationships characterize the nature of the aesthetic domain vis-à-vis the broader cultural system, it would follow that these relationships determine to a significant degree the content and direction of aesthetic activities. Thus Maquet's analysis would suggest that what I call transformations into the aesthetic domain (see below) will occur in some systematically discernible pattern. These

transformations will be consistent with prevailing (or nascent) cultural ideologies. They will also, in formal terms, be consistent with structural features of the cultural system. Thus the embeddedness of aesthetic phenomena in both the form and content (or structure and ideology) of the cultural system.

Maquet has gone yet one step further, however, in describing the implications of the aesthetic-as-cultural. For while aesthetic phenomena are cultural in every sense, Maquet acknowledges that they belong most fundamentally to the ideational level of culture [1971: 22]. It is here that they are created, and it is here that they function as objects designed for contemplation [Maquet 1971: 5-6, 35]. Consistent with the view to be taken in this study, Maquet concludes that aesthetic phenomena (and, by implication, aesthetic experience) belong to the sphere of ideas rather than of action.

Following from this, Maquet is led to the position that aesthetic phenomena cannot, on their own, generate new consistency relationships within the cultural system [1971: 31]. Put into other terms, this means that aesthetic phenomena as ideational phenomena do not and cannot operate in violation of culturally prescribed frameworks of action and meaning. As specifically aesthetic phenomena, as opposed to ideational phenomena in general,

this sanction is even more binding.

Having stressed the culture-bound nature of aesthetic phenomena at the outset, it is equally necessary, as Maquet would agree, to recognize their particularly aesthetic quality. Thus, the following pages will describe the dynamics of the aesthetic domain and its dialectical relationship to culture.

The Quality of Aesthetic Experience

For an understanding of the metamorphosis of reality into art we must include a discussion of what is called aesthetic experience, or the stance of the viewer towards that which has been designated as 'art object' or aesthetic phenomenon by the cultural system.

From phenomenological accounts we can posit the nature of this particular stance. Man's characteristic relationship to his world is one that can be described as 'naturalistic' or 'naive.' We act out our lives immersed in a stream of objects and events and conventionalized meanings which we experience as 'everyday reality.' One means of breaking from this stance is through the experience of art and the assumption of the aesthetic attitude (see Natanson 1970: 108- 127). Here our customary relationship to everyday reality is, in a certain sense, suspended. Berger and Luckmann [1967: 25] give an example of the excursion into this other attitude or mode of experiencing reality as it occurs at theatrical performances.

the transition between realities is marked by the rising and falling of the curtain. As the curtain rises, the spectator is "transported to another world," with its own meanings and an order that may or may not have much to do with the order of everyday life. As the curtain falls, the spectator "returns to reality," that is, to the paramount reality of everyday life by comparison with which the reality

presented on the stage now appears tenuous and ephemeral, however vivid the presentation may have been a few moments previously

The dominant feature of aesthetic experience is thus seen as one of 'otherness' in relation to everyday reality. This sense of distance, however, is sometimes exaggerated in phenomenological accounts. Our sense of aesthetic experience or our assumption of the aesthetic attitude is ultimately conditioned by cultural factors. In the description given by Berger and Luckmann, for example, the rising and falling of the curtain is in fact a specific cultural convention, or what John Dewey has called an "indexical sign," to tell us that we are shifting realities. The cultural conditioning and the cultural components of aesthetic experience will be reasserted throughout this study.

If aesthetic experience cannot be completely divorced from the world of cultural reality it is nevertheless a qualitatively different kind of experiencing. The 'otherness' which rightly characterizes it is a function of reacting from a stance of contemplation rather than of action. Dufrenne [1973: 359, 361] explains this difference by comparing the phenomenology of everyday perception where "to comprehend an object...is to locate it in a world of external objects in which action manifests itself" with the aesthetic or contemplative stance wherein

"the world of the work exists in comprehension or intension, not in extension." Contemplation causes us to be absorbed into the work, in and for itself. Particularly in Western societies this special 'attending' to an object which we call art is through visual contemplation [see Maquet, 1971: 5-6].

Something else of the nature of aesthetic experience as contemplation can be understood from the work of Edward Bullough [1957]. Bullough coined the phrase "psychical distance" to account for the seeming 'otherness' of aesthetic experience as a function of contemplation, although this phenomenon has since been understood to have a wider function in art and literature. Our sense of "psychical distance" while watching a play, for example, prevents us from rushing onstage to stop a 'murder' from taking place. For Bullough, the creation of distance in this sense is a function of both the object or event and the perceiver. In other words, both qualities of the object or event and the dispositions and cognitive sets of the perceiver will interact to relegate the experience to one of 'distance.' That this is an interactive process must be emphasized. That it is at the same time a part of our repertoire of cultural behaviour is also true. While in an aesthetic context we may suspend certain behaviour (not saving a 'dying' man on stage) and certain

expectations ('allowing' the sun to be blue in a painting) we do not and cannot operate in a vacuum. We cannot eliminate the cultural frameworks which allow us to perceive meaning in an object or event. The 'otherness' of aesthetic experience derives from the contemplative attitude, but contemplation itself is directed towards particular experiences by cultural dictates. Distancing is culturally determined insofar as aesthetic experience itself is a culturally formed event.

The essential connection of aesthetic experience and everyday (cultural) reality leads us to recognize the inherent continuum which marks human experience. Allie Frazier [1973: 392] has formulated this in phenomenological terms by taking the 'distancing' which occurs in the contemplative mode as a general and flexible mechanism for dealing with experience.

one way in which we relate to our world,
one way in which we comport ourselves
toward being-in-the-world is that of
"bringing phenomena close" or "relegating
them to remoteness." Such a phenomenon
creates a "lived" spatiality for us, both
with respect to our "handling" the things
of our world, including the relations into
which we enter with other men, and in
relation to the moods and affectations of
our interior life.

Thus, the "otherness" of aesthetic experience does not in fact operate outside of everyday reality but is itself a method for dealing with it. Distancing is not a static

phenomena but can be deployed according to needs and circumstances, specifically those which are culturally determined. In Western societies, for example, the 'otherness' of art is reinforced in spatial terms. Museums are set aside as special places for experiencing things in an aesthetic mode, or from a distance.

That art, in general, functions to order and thereby segment experience as Frazier has pointed out is well described by Nancy Munn [1971: 336]:

Culturally standardized systems of visual representation, like other sets of cultural codes, function as mechanisms for ordering experience and segmenting it into manageable categories.

Thus, art may be seen to perform a "coping" function. I will suggest here that aesthetic phenomena can be seen as a kind of cultural safety valve where things, events and people can be "relegated to remoteness" and removed from the sphere of action into the realm of contemplation.

Transformation into the Aesthetic Domain

If we acknowledge one function of aesthetic phenomena and experience as being a culturally determined category of 'otherness' or distance, we can then examine some of the consequences for who or what is transformed or mediated into this domain.

All art, in a real sense, may be considered as being created out of "found objects." Out of the realm of human experience we find that certain things have been deemed fitting (and perhaps worthy) of being transformed into art or objects for contemplation. In different eras and across cultures what is chosen as a suitable subject for art will change according to shifting world views, reorientations of ideological schema and changing historical circumstances. In general, however, we can say that art metamorphoses according to cultural prescriptions. These will circumscribe what or who is transformed, how it is to be done, and will provide explanatory frameworks which support and justify the work. In line with the argument of this thesis, we can say that such choices about what moves into the aesthetic domain are often conditioned by cultural needs or desires to keep certain phenomena (people and events) at a distance from experiential reality.

At this point a tentative hypothesis will be offered

to shed light on the specific kind of transformation into the aesthetic domain which has been effected by social documentary photography.

In the non-Western world, art by metamorphosis² seems to be well represented in literate societies — which were also large, powerful, and conquering — and rather exceptional among nonliterate ones — which were usually of moderate size and rarely domineering. It may be that the first things to be metamorphosed into art objects are the artifacts of foreign societies that have lost their independence, and of the weak strata inside a society such as the peasants.

[Maquet 1971: 24]

While his specific claims as to the first things to be transformed into art are not under scrutiny here and thus cannot be agreed to, Maquet's general proposition that the metamorphosis into art is preconditioned or even predetermined by socio-cultural factors is accepted. His theory that this transformation is directed towards particular artifacts also conforms to the view taken in this thesis. What is most important, however, is that I feel Maquet's hypothesis takes on an added dimension, and a unique relevancy for photography, when it is understood that such a metamorphosis occurs not only with regard to

² As used by Maquet, the concept of "art by metamorphosis" describes a specific sub-category of aesthetic phenomena. As used elsewhere in this thesis, however, metamorphosis is taken to be the standard mechanism for the creation of aesthetic phenomena. This distinction is noted for clarification; it does not affect the meaning of the noted passage as quoted in the present context.

things but also with regard to people.

At a general level we can assert that the absorption of artifacts into the art network of a society is at the same time a reflection or indication of an attitude towards the context from which the artifacts were taken. I would characterize this attitude as one of domination, or aesthetic imperialism. Here, aesthetic imperialism implies control by one society over others through the acquisition of their art; more generally, however, it can be seen as the exercise of power in determining what or who will be transformed into aesthetic phenomena, and over subsequent rights of interpretation, access, reproduction and use.

In terms of the specific subject of this thesis, I see social documentary photography as an especially effective agent of such an ideology. Photography is a creation and tool of societies which are "large, powerful, and conquering" and the social documentary image has most frequently taken as its subject those peoples who live in relatively weak foreign societies and those who occupy the "weak strata" in the photographers' own society. Through the magic of the image we have not only objects but people, even entire living cultural communities, transformed into aesthetic phenomena. The transforming qualities of the photograph make it possible for us to encounter living cultural realities in a vicarious and specifically aesthetic

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(contemplative) mode. For example, Bruce Davidson's images [1970] of the residents of East 100th Street, Spanish Harlem, in New York City are framed and hung in The Museum of Modern Art, a few minutes by subway from the existential reality which has thus been metamorphosed into art. "Photos Transform Experience into Art" [Kramer 1970] as the title tells us in an article on Davidson's work. Mediated into aesthetic phenomena, people are relegated to the 'otherness' fostered by the distancing effect of contemplation and the aesthetic attitude and to the safe preserve of art.

The entry of the poor, the powerless, and the culturally different into the aesthetic domain of Western societies has been a marked phenomenon during the 19th and 20th centuries. In the past 150 years this process has been accelerated and intensified through the art of photography. I would suggest that this particular cultural choice of subjects for aesthetic objects can be seen as a manipulation of the 'otherness' which derives from contemplation, the stance of the viewer towards aesthetic phenomena, to reinforce and perpetuate cultural attitudes which establish categories for distinguishing between 'Ourselves' and 'Others.' Social documentary photography has played a significant role in reifying those people who, by their transformation into art objects, can then be kept

at a culturally desirable distance from 'ourselves' as a category of 'others.' Perhaps ours is the age of aesthetic imperialism: subjugating people with the camera rather than the gun; creating aesthetic 'reserves' on museum territory.

In this way photography, and the photographer himself, can be seen to take on a pseudo-anthropological role. Photographers have roamed the globe and walked the ghetto streets and have come back to expose us to many more views of men and cultures than were ever possible before the advent of their art. Photographers have functioned as culture brokers, mediating between cultural worlds, with the image as the link between those worlds. They have not acted passively, however, but have communicated through their imagery concepts about the nature of man and culture. In this sense the photographic image has created both a visual statement and an anthropological thesis. This more generalized function of social documentary photography, which establishes a framework in which the segregation of mankind into 'Ourselves' and 'Others' takes place, provides information on the nature of man, culture and society.

This transformation of reality into art is an intricate and involved construction which presents us with a world which has been re-created as it is mediated into

the aesthetic domain. Above all, it must be understood as being a process. The image itself is the final product of an interpretation of reality which is shaped through the history of photography and the individual artist himself; the formal and technical properties of the medium; and the inputs from the broader cultural system. Cultural factors will condition aesthetic choices ranging from the artistic content — what is visually appropriate — to the political — who are the oppressed to be made visible ('visual') — to the economic — who will look out from coffee table art books. The ties which necessarily bind the aesthetic domain — which here encompasses the photograph, the photographer and the audience of viewers and commentators — to the cultural system of which it is a part will be traced in the following chapters.

CHAPTER 3

MODELS FOR METAMORPHOSIS AND
SOCIAL DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY

Introduction

The specific ways in which photography has transformed its subjects into art — aesthetic and contemplative phenomena — must be examined within a cultural context. The preceding chapter has set out the general mechanisms, both cultural and aesthetic, which would determine the nature and direction of photography. It has also set out the idea that photography has served to metamorphose its subjects; through aesthetic transformation, into art objects and has thereby distanced them, as a category of 'Others,' into a 'safe' domain set apart from experiential reality.

In the present chapter the specific cultural and historical factors which have shaped photography are introduced. Out of this cultural setting some dominant tendencies and tensions are shown to have affected photography's development and choice of subject matter. It is argued that cultural factors have generated three models for photography: Realism, the Documentary, and Primitivism. These models are described and it is stressed that they are interlocking and dialectical in nature and function.

Finally, the source material for the three models is explained in order to allow the reader to follow the

next chapters which will examine Realism, the Documentary, and Primitivism, respectively. Overall the present chapter is intended as the general introduction to the remainder of the thesis.

The Historical Setting

The historian of photography John Szarkowski has written:

The history of photography has been less a journey than a growth. Its movement has not been linear and consecutive, but centrifugal. [1966: Introduction]

In this statement we have an important truth about the photographic enterprise which I would like to call "the unity of photographic experience"³. While there have been trends, developments and discoveries which have affected photography during its history, they seem less significant than the consistency of the work of the photographers and the images which have accumulated over the last 150 years.

The centrifugal force which Szarkowski sees in photographic history is, in fact, the cultural setting of the art. Despite the passage of time and history, the worlds of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are not dissimilar. What began in the nineteenth century has been carried on into our own era: the growth of science, modern technology, the social sciences; the quest for exploration and imperialism. In short, dealing with the idea of a 'global society,' with all its attendant

³I am borrowing here from the title and spirit of Etienne Gilson's The Unity of Philosophical Experience [1937].

challenges and problems, has perhaps been the major feature of both centuries. Accommodating to this new structure of reality has taken many forms. With the invention of photography in the 1820's, both a witness to and a bearer of this new era emerged.

Photography was immediately pressed into service. Within only a decade or two after its appearance, photography enabled Europeans to see the human landscape of Africa and Asia. These images were not meant to be mere amusements. As Aaron Scharf notes, they were to demonstrate artists' misrepresentations and "render an important service to anthropological investigation" [1974: 336], as in the case of the daguerreotype expedition of 1844 to seek out the aborigines of Brazil. The man who promoted this Brazilian trip, François Arago, is an important figure in the early history of photography. By examining his views of the new invention we can see the direction photography was to take for many years to come.

François Arago was the Director of the Observatory of Paris and a member of France's Chamber of Deputies, a prominent scientist and an advocate of social reform. He saw photography as capable of making a unique contribution to society, and he is believed to have been responsible for persuading Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, the inventor of the daguerreotype, to leave his invention in the public

domain rather than sell it to private interests [Scharf 1974: 25]. With such an invention accessible to all, Arago could fulfill his desire to "nobly give to the whole world this discovery which could contribute so much to the progress of art and science" [quoted in Scharf 1974: 26].

As an advocate of the benefits of modern technology he saw in photography not just an aid to science and art but a social tool: "Let the machine and human decency turn away from centuries of ignorance, barbarism and misery"

[quoted in Scharf 1974: 25]. In François Arago we can see the key elements of the mystique which still draws modern man to photography: the art of universal dimensions, the flawless recorder in aid of science, and the handmaiden of social progress.

Presentation of the Models

With this understanding of photography and photographic history, I would like to put forward three models which correspond to the ways in which Arago's nineteenth century France and we today have used the medium. They have served as models for structuring reality for photography and its audience. At the same time they act as explanatory systems or frameworks from which we can interpret the nature of the art. At this time I will present them in schematic form and suggest their role as both photographic and cultural models.

PRIMITIVISM

world of essences
art
idealism
redemptive ideology

REALISM

world of facts
science
empiricism
surrogate reality function

THE DOCUMENTARY

world of action
social science and technology
progress
social engineering function

The construction of the models can be explained as follows. Beneath each title is an indication of the assumptions which underlie each. These assumptions have been evident in the images themselves and have been articulated in the words of their makers and commentators. They ground each model in a set of philosophical and cultural propositions about the nature of the world and of man.

At the first level, then, there are assumptions about the nature of the world as defined through the role of the image:

- PRIMITIVISM: the belief that photographs reveal the world of essences
- REALISM : the belief that photographs capture the world of 'empirical reality'
- DOCUMENTARY: the belief that photographs can have a practical effect on everyday life or, more dramatically, can inspire action such that the present world can be changed for the 'better' or, as a variant, to salvage remnants of a changing world which is perceived as getting 'worse'

At the next level, these first sets of assumptions are connected to those aspects of culture to which they correspond:

PRIMITIVISM: art

REALISM: science

DOCUMENTARY: social science and technology

The third level indicates the ideological frameworks which they uphold:

PRIMITIVISM: a belief in idealism

REALISM: a belief in empiricism

DOCUMENTARY: a belief in progress

The final set summarizes the function of each framework or model:

PRIMITIVISM: redemptive ideology

REALISM: surrogate reality function

DOCUMENTARY: social engineering function

Even an initial examination would indicate that the relations between the models form a complex system. In their actual operation, the models do not segment as neatly as shown above. Often they work in tandem, with one or another being dominant in a given case. Many of the photographic works discussed in this study could have been analysed under more than one model. That this should be the case is not surprising, although it made for a difficult selection process at times. For example, overlap is evident in the case of Realism and the Documentary, as the idea of

progress is an outgrowth of modern science. Contradictions seem obvious when looking at the tenants of Realism and Primitivism, yet the two often work together. What is less obvious, however, are the cultural ties which bind these models together. For it is the cultural setting which makes sense, so to speak, of the connections and the contradictions between the models. Thus, we will briefly continue the account given in the preceeding section and show how these models emerged as an aesthetic-cultural accomodation to the new era and why they can be considered to form a cohesive system.

The Models in Cultural Context

All three models have been used, sometimes in seemingly divisive fashion, to create an image of man and culture which would enable Western societies to cope with the widening world of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. All spoke, in varying ways, to the changes brought about by the rapid increase in knowledge and communication. The idea of Man which has been produced during this era has altered to correspond to the enlarged scope of human affairs. Photography's growth has been a cause as well as a response to these changes.

Whether newly 'visible' lower classes or newly encountered societies in far-off lands, Western society had to arrange for the inclusion of other peoples into Humanity. Having opened up the globe through the era of exploration, imperialism, and the growth of the nation state, the peoples 'found' in the deserts of Arabia as well as the alleyways of London had to be accounted for. The culturally removed, the poor, the powerless and the marginal — what schema to use?

I would suggest that it is through the aesthetic domain that these people found their way into the new world created by Western society. Given the conditions set down for aesthetic phenomena in the preceding chapter,

I would argue that Maquet's hypothesis [see supra, p.25] applies in this case: that foreign societies and the weak strata inside our society are most subject to aesthetic transformation. By metamorphosizing these people into aesthetic phenomena, they could at one stroke be brought into our cultural categories and yet be kept apart from 'ourselves.' Photography proved an excellent means by which to ensure that such a contradiction would occur. It could combine the illusion of making others appear 'really real' and immediately accessible while at the same time operating in accord with those rules of the aesthetic domain which would confer them with a sense of 'otherness.' Susan Sontag describes this phenomenon as follows:

photography implies instant access to the real. But the results of this practice of instant access are another way of creating distance. To possess the world in the form of images is, precisely, to re-experience the unreality and remoteness of the real. [1977: 27]

The three models — Realism, the Documentary, and Primitivism — have each been proposed to explain the mechanics of this transformation. These models have necessarily structured both visual perception and thought. They have created an image of man that would demonstrate him to be both a particular creature of habit and custom and an essential symbol of humanity. In their particularity and uniqueness men are fleeting and culture-bound. In his

essence Man is timeless and universal and, by extension, remote. Man as Humanity has remained the dominant schema, working through the model of Primitivism.

Yet why go through the exercise of creating man in his plurality and uniqueness if the end result transforms him into Humanity? For modern man who derides the mere 'say so' of traditional thought, ideology had to be supported by 'proof' — then it was palatable. In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" Walter Benjamin explains this deception as it was practiced by the new arts, among which photography has been the paradigmatic case:

two circumstances [are] related to the increasing significance of the masses in contemporary life. Namely, the desire of contemporary masses to bring things "closer" spatially and humanly, which is just about as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction. Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction.... To pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose "sense of the universal equality of things" has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction. Thus is manifested in the field of perception what in the theoretical sphere is noticeable in the increasing importance of statistics. The adjustment of reality to the masses and of the masses to reality is a process of unlimited scope, as much for thinking as for perception. [1969: 223]

Photography, in this situation, accomplishes the illusion of bringing things 'closer' while at the same time ensuring their distance. Each of the three models is a cultural-aesthetic framework which shapes this process. Primitivism, however, is seen as the dominant force in photographic work because it could resolve, at an aesthetic level, the contradictions of the modern era. Resolution in this sense is in fact an accommodation at the ideational level of culture to a situation deeply rooted in the historical-cultural facts of the era. For Western society had enlarged its world and then, looking inward, was at times troubled by the new age. Changes seemed too rapid at times; complexity made people yearn for a simplicity to life; and expansion was met by a desire to make things as they had been, manageable again. Thus what could prove to be an entirely disruptive situation needed to be contained. Through the mystique of the camera and the ideology of Primitivism we can trace a circuitous and ingenious route to this end.

Source Materials

The three chapters which follow provide a description and analysis of the models introduced in this chapter. In examining these models of the social documentary image I have related them to three frameworks which were formulated to describe movements of art and the creation of aesthetic phenomena during the last 150 years. I will rely here largely on the work of Linda Nochlin [1971], William Stott [1973], and Robert Goldwater [1967], respectively.

Goldwater's classic work on Primitivism was not concerned with photography, while Nochlin's study deals with photography mainly as an impetus to the growth of Realism as found in nineteenth century painting. Stott's analysis of the documentary impulse during the 1920's - 1940's period in the United States does explicitly focus on photography as one of the mediums directly related to the documentary movement of the time. Thus, I am making some new applications of previously existing theories. I would substantiate this on several grounds. One, is that photographers can be seen as having been influenced by general aesthetic trends and theories of their time. And, more importantly, all the arts, including photography, were responding, albeit in their own distinctive way, to more general cultural influences. As the authors themselves point out, as cultural and specifically ideational

phenomena, these models have also been operational in shaping other activities such as the communication arts, the social sciences, and social policy.

The choice of these three works to guide my analysis was made because of their relevancy to photography and their depth as studies of art within a cultural framework. They also stress the degree to which aesthetic phenomena are created, as found objects, by transformations generated by the structure and demands of the cultural system, and particularly by prevailing ideological frameworks. Their assumptions, therefore, conform to the perspective taken in this thesis.

CHAPTER 4

REALISM

Introduction

The photographic image has been a part of the ideology that has come to be called by the name Realism. Linda Nochlin [1971] has described the development of this tradition in the European arts of the nineteenth century as a "new pictorial structure of reality" [1971: 182]. It was, and remains, an interpretive framework which has roots in and effects upon the cultural and philosophical systems of Western societies.

To grasp the nature and emergence of Realism, as Gisèle Freund points out, it is necessary to understand its inseparability from the new aesthetics generated by Positivism [1974: 75]. The promulgation of Positivism by Auguste Comte in his Positive Philosophy was both a model of and for the framework through which Europeans of the 1840's and 1850's had begun to interpret reality.

Positivism was to Comte definitely the most efficient type of understanding, and closest to the truth. He was convinced that all forms of society should be studied objectively, because value judgments had no place in science. Positivism "neither admires nor condemns political facts, but looks upon them as simple objects of observation." [De Waal Malefijt 1974: 111]

Translated into the field of art, Positivism yielded similar demands:

On exige une exactitude scientifique, une reproduction fidèle de la réalité dans l'oeuvre d'art. L'expression de Taine: "Je veux reproduire les choses comme elles sont ou comme elles seraient, même si moi je n'existais pas", devient le leitmotiv d'une nouvelle esthétique. [Freund 1974: 74]

Reality was thus taken to have an objective and absolute existence, and artists were to observe and inscribe this reality with scientific exactitude. Photography, as can be appreciated, soon came to be seen as the most eminently suited of all the arts to achieve this ideal. As a product of scientific technology, the camera was the natural bearer of the new aesthetic.

Positivism, however, was still yet a piece in the larger fabric of the changing Europe of the mid-eighteenth century. Changes in science, the social sciences and the arts, as well as in the social and political sphere, both reflected and reinforced the entirely new consciousness or construction of reality. The general conditions which precipitated the development of photography within the framework of Realism were as complex as the new era and the new art itself.

La transformation sociale et économique qui s'opéra au sein de la bourgeoisie du XIX^e siècle, eut pour conséquence un déplacement des états de conscience. Le développement de l'industrie, parallèle au développement de la technique, le progrès des sciences croissant en même temps que le besoin d'industrialisation,

exigeaient des formes rationnelles économiques. Il en résulta une transformation de la représentation qu'on se faisait de la nature et de leurs rapports réciproques. Une conscience nouvelle de la réalité, une appréciation inconnue des valeurs de la nature se révélaient; elles eurent pour conséquence dans l'art une poussée vers l'objectivité, poussée qui correspond à l'essence de la photographie. [Freund 1974: 73-74]

The Nature of Realism

The Realists sought to transform art into an objective medium, freed from past conventions, for describing the empirical world. A demand for immersion in the present social reality, for the immediacy of the present moment and concreteness rather than generalities marked the Realist trend. In order to carry out these demands artists felt the need to 'democratize' the range of subject matter that would be transformed into art, and a positive value was placed on depicting the poor and peasant classes [Nochlin 1971: 33-34]. After the Revolutions of 1848 the labouring peasant, "the grandeur of le peuple" was raised to "an article of faith" by the artists of the time [Nochlin 1971: 112]. Here, the urge to translate social reality into art led painters to seek after what they saw as being most 'real' about society: the essential dignity of the peasant.

The Realists, who sought to break away from what they saw as the traditional metier of the arts — the tendency for moralizing, for religious expression, and for grandiose speculations about Man, God and Nature — created instead a new double-edged myth in the name of Realism. Science on the one side, and The People on the other became their masters. The People were a new

creation, a found object for aesthetic consumption.

the choice of the image of the peasant to embody contemporary labour was...a function of Realist myth. For while it is true that the peasant still accounted for the largest proportion of the working force in Europe, nevertheless, he and his life, his habits and customs, were already beginning to be recognized as part of a vanishing reality. It is noteworthy that collectors of popular art and literature, like Buchon and Champfleury, felt some urgency about amassing their material, and that the French government itself encouraged school teachers throughout France to note down local folk songs. The elaborate wedding rituals...alluded to by Courbet in his TOILET OF THE BRIDE were already beginning to die out. [Nochlin 1971: 115]

When The People were depicted in their day-to-day life painters included images of the religious element of society. But these meticulously observed and executed paintings

betray no direct religious feeling at all, but rather, within the context of more or less objective description a yearning sympathy with the archaic faith of these touchingly simple beings, producing equally touching pictorial records of a dying if exemplary pattern of rural life, expressed in appropriately rustic, and sometimes primitivizing, pictorial language.

[Nochlin 1971: 92]

The "primitivizing" effect resulted from the fact that these artists, much as they tried to imagine it possible, could not describe only the 'facts,' but had to interpret and mediate social reality through the interpretive framework of their cultural milieu. The myth of The People

was such a framework, and the 'truth' it provided was the particular product of the Western Europe of the nineteenth century.

The Realists' search for the truth, based on facts, was conditioned by the growing influence of science in nineteenth century Europe [Nochlin 1971: 41]. They likewise saw in science a denial of a priori assumptions, and a reaching out for 'pure' description which would describe how and not why things happen [Nochlin 1971: 43]. Things were to be described, not explained. Reality was to be made 'real.' This sense of the scientific attitude led the Realists to a radical kind of empiricism, wherein 'pure' facts could be grasped by intuition [see Nochlin 1971: 36] and presented as the true reality. 'True reality,' in turn, brings us back to a search for essences, which was precisely what the Realists were revolting against.

Nochlin's analysis sets down what can be described as the internal contradiction of Realism. This is the adoption of a pseudo-scientism which involved a movement not only to the empirical world but, and perhaps we might add necessarily, beyond the world of things to the world of essences. We can say that the Realists were naïve in thinking they could operate in an ideological vacuum, without moorings, in an interpretive framework of culturally

determined meanings. But, more importantly, we can see that they charted a course which has been followed, by society and photography, since then. As William M. Ivins, Jr. has noted:

The 19th century began by believing that what was reasonable was true and it would end up by believing that what it saw a photograph of was true. [quoted in Szarkowski 1966: Introduction]

Realism and Photography

The phenomenal growth of the photograph coincided with the movement of Realism. The Realists, in fact, used the photograph as both model and paradigm of their intentions [Nochlin 1971: 44; Scharf 1974: 128-163]. The photographic image was taken as the objective recorder of facts, the machine which could capture the spontaneous moment. The photograph, too, reflected the denial of narrative, of explanation which the Realists sought. And the 'democratization' of art was seen to be most fully realized through photography. As Nochlin has already pointed out above, in regard to painting, the contradictions of Realism are likewise evident in photography.

The metamorphosis of existential reality into an aesthetic medium is not unique to photography. It appears, however, that photography's particular qualities, both ontological and phenomenological, create a special kind of metamorphosis. André Bazin's interpretation of the photographic image is a classic statement on the nature of the 'magic' of photography and its unique relationship to the 'real' world:

In spite of any objections our critical spirit may offer, we are forced to accept as real the existence of the object reproduced, actually RE-presented, set before us, that is to say, in time and space. Photography enjoys a certain

advantage in virtue of this transference of reality from the thing to its reproduction.... The photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it. [1967: 13-14; emphasis added]

That the photographic image bears an uncanny likeness to the world of everyday reality has been noted since the birth of the medium. That the air of 'factuality,' of 'truthful' representation are part of photography's mystique have likewise been a dominating feature in the historical commentaries [see especially Newhall 1964; Braive 1966]. On viewing the images made by Mathew Brady at the Battle of Antietam during the American Civil War, Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote in 1863:

Let him who wishes to know what war is... look at this series of illustrations.... It was so nearly like visiting the battlefield to look over these views, that all the emotions excited by the actual sight of the stained and sordid scene, strewn with rags and wrecks, came back to us, and we buried them in the recesses of our cabinet as we would have buried the mutilated remains of the dead they too vividly represented.
[quoted in Taft 1964: 235-236]

John Szarkowski has pointed to what it was that Holmes found, as have many others before and since, riveting in the photographic image:

The heroic documentation of the American Civil War by the Brady group, and the incomparably larger photographic record of the Second World War, have this in common: neither explained, without

extensive captioning, what was happening. The function of these pictures was not to make the story clear, it was to make it real. [1966: Introduction]

The photographic image thus provides a surrogate reality function. We perceive the image as the 'real' thing re-presented to us by the camera which, in the hands of the photographer, was there as a witness. This is the capturing of the empirical world through the image.

Despite the many criticisms of this faith in the objective truth-value of the photograph [see for example Byers 1966; Sekula 1975] it still remains a potent idea to both photographers and viewers alike. Photographers themselves contribute to this fallacy by saying little about their own presuppositions, about their work and the factors which determine it, and ultimately by letting the image "speak for itself."

Images are perhaps thought to be able to 'speak' for themselves if we accept what Stephen Tyler has described (and roundly criticized) as the belief in the "empiricist dogma" of "loquacious facts" [1969: 68-69]. Photographers, as people who have the aura coming from the envied position of 'having been there,' are too often seen as re-presenters of some unmediated slice of reality. The "loquacious" image is as much a fallacy as is the loquacious fact. Reality is an elaborate construction, of our own making,

which "speaks" to us only according to the perspective we bring and the questions we ask. Yet in an age dominated by the empiricist fallacy, both we and our nineteenth century forebearers have generally accepted photography as a surrogate reality.

We can see, however, that even in what may be described as photography's simplest act — the reproduction of art objects — reality is not taken into the image passively. André Malraux has explored this subject in his aptly titled work, Le Musée Imaginaire (the English title, Museum Without Walls, is less effective in conveying his intent). As Malraux reminds us, the power of the photograph lies in its ability to create realities rather than to reproduce them:

For the past 100 years (if we except the activities of specialists) the history of art has been the history of that which can be photographed. [1967: 111]

For here, as Malraux notes, photography has created not simply a surrogate but an imaginary reality. The 'mere' act of photographing art works involves transformations of the objects, often creating "fictitious arts" [Malraux 1967: 86]. Miniatures take on the same scale as murals; fragments of a single work, isolated through the use of camera lighting, angle and framing, take on a newly created meaning though a change in context; and entire works of

art taken out of context, such as the stained glass window of a cathedral, become new and singular creations of the camera [see Malraux 1967: 77-162]. By changing the context of an object or event, through formal or cultural means, 'found' objects are created. In mediating between the object and the viewer, photography creates new objects for aesthetic perception.

Perhaps the most significant of new subjects created for aesthetic consumption have been people themselves. Bringing 'the masses' into art has been a function of the aesthetic domain in Western societies since the time of the Realist painters. In photography this role has been especially prominent. What has been described as the "democratizing" nature of photography can be seen from several perspectives.

An early recognition of this possibility of "democratization" in the art of photography appears in an amusing, although highly perceptive commentary from 1860. With the invention of the carte de visite by Disdéri, the paper photograph was now available in large quantities and at relatively modest cost. As this piece which appeared in a Paris journal records, it opened up new possibilities for artist and audience alike.

You will have heard of the Disdérian invention, ma'am; it is delightful and quite absorbing. It has quite supplanted

...all the other manias of varying degrees of absurdity which sweep Paris every winter. Unlike the previous manias, however, this one is intelligent and amusing as well as costly; the sun makes the same charge for reproducing the features of royalty as for those of an actress from the Bouffes-Parisiennes

Another anxiety felt by those collectors who desire to set the fashion for the winter: should albums [of cartes des visites] be arranged in categories or should the collection be a motley one, a pot-pourri? If you desire my opinion on this grave question, ma'am, I should say that I am for the motley. It is more amusing and less impersonal. To restore to men and women that equality in the eye of the Sun which they have not in the eye of man — this seems to me as just as it is diverting. [quoted in Braive 1966: 67]

The creation, or illusion of some democratic order to social reality is often imposed by the photographer himself. It was not the power of the Sun, but of the photographer which could "democratize" photographic experience. As Virginia Wolfe comments on the work of the Victorian photographer Julia Margaret Cameron:

She cared nothing for the miseries of her sitters or for their rank. The carpenter and the Crown Prince of Russia alike must sit as still as stones in the attitude she chose, in the draperies she arranged, for as long as she wished. [quoted in Braive 1966: 111]

Lewis Hine, photographing during the early decades of the twentieth century, took a different path to "democratization" and one which resembles that of the first Realists. To "democratize" was to 'elevate' all

humanity to the domain of art. As Susan Sontag has noted, there was "a promise inherent in photography from its very beginning: to democratize all experiences by translating them into images" [1973: 59]. And through the image, all experience potentially becomes art. Hine himself, speaking to the Conference of Charities and Corrections in Buffalo in 1909, cautioned his listeners against making art the preserve of the elite, rather than the servant of The People:

Paint us an angel...paint us a Madonna...
but do not impose on us any esthetic rules
which shall banish from the reign of art
those old women with work-worn hands
scraping carrots...

It is needful that we should remember
their existence, else we may happen to
leave them out of our religion and
philosophy, and frame lofty theories
which only fit a world of extremes.
Therefore, let art always remind us of
them; therefore, let us always have men
ready to give the loving pains of life
to the faithful representing of common-
place things, men who see beauty in the
commonplace things, and delight in showing
how kindly the light of heaven falls on
them. [quoted in Gutman 1967: 29]

For Hine, as for many other photographers, the photographic image promised to bring light to the world, and The People out of darkness [cf. Gutman 1967: 29]. Yet at the same time it transformed The People into art and, it could be said, relegated them to only a different order of invisibility.

CHAPTER 5

* THE DOCUMENTARY

Introduction

The photographic image as Documentary has grown from both the surrogate reality function of Realism and the redemptive ideology of Primitivism. What it partakes of in addition to these is an ideology which asserts that the social world is amenable to change and improvement and that the photograph can be an impetus to such change. The photograph becomes not only a witness to the world, but a force for changing it. The photographer himself takes on an active role in asserting the factuality of the events depicted, the underlying truths of the situation as he has seen them, and the sense of involvement which he experienced at the time of photographing. All of these he hopes will be re-experienced by the viewer, and he works towards this end.

The intent to make the photographic image appear 'real' and hence 'true' is not unique to the Documentary tradition. The importance of presenting factual content is, as we have seen, an issue in the more general field of Realism. What the Documentary ideology does is to continue and enlarge upon the Realist philosophy. It does this by stressing the idea of social facts, or the social determination of 'significant facts.' The Realist motive 'democratizes' art by including certain sectors of the 'lower' classes in the aesthetic domain. The Primitivist

Assumption extends this 'democratization' of aesthetic phenomena by including cross-cultural subjects and artifacts. Both of these components work to shape the direction and scope of the photograph as Documentary.

It is perhaps not surprising that photography came to be conceived of as an activist medium. In its early days photography was considered a marvel of scientific ingenuity. It became part of a culture that was using the growing powers of science and later of the social sciences to determine the nature and course of human society; not only for Western Europe, but, through exploration and imperialism, for an ever-widening portion of humanity. An ideology based on a concept of social engineering complimented, and was a natural outgrowth of the belief in man's control, through science, over both his natural and social environment. A belief in Progress took hold and with it a belief that photography could be used to further such an ideology.

In analysing the Documentary, however, it will be seen that the aesthetic nature of the photograph usually prevents such activist ends. Within an aesthetic framework, the present is distanced into a sentimentalized past. While the Documentary aims for action, it operates to salvage the present through the image and thereby mediates contemporary experience into aesthetic objects. In

performing this role it serves its society by distancing certain events into art and thereby functions as a 'coping' mechanism or safety valve: the real event is removed from the sphere of action. This, it is argued, is in line with the essentially primitivizing effect of photographic work wherein aesthetic transformation is the end result.

One further aspect of the Documentary will be noted in the following pages because of its frequent appearance in photographic commentary. Even the most cursory survey of the Documentary will reveal a decided preference on the part of photographers for subjects who are either culturally different and/or economically depressed. Explanations offered to account for these choices perhaps reveal, more than any other aspect of the Documentary, the naïveté and rationalizations of much conventional photographic commentary and the need for an analysis of photography within the cultural framework which conditions its role and function.

The Nature of the Documentary

William Stott in Documentary Expression and Thirties America [1973] has given an analysis of the nature of the Documentary. While the Documentary as a general cultural phenomena — evident in the arts, literature, reportage, and social sciences — reached its prominence during the 1930's in North America, it has a much longer history. In line with the perspective on photographic history in this thesis, I will look at the Documentary as a persistent feature of photographic ideology.

Following Stott's analysis, we can set out the characteristics of the photograph as an expression of the Documentary impulse. Such images would be structured so that: 1) a sense of 'being there' is conveyed which evokes an emotional response in the viewer who shares in a sense of "lived experience" [Stott: 11]; 2) the social facts portrayed are made 'real' (authentic or 'true'); 3) the situation shown is made historically and socially specific in order to suggest that society has created the situation portrayed and it therefore can be remedied [Stott 1973: 20]; 4) a large public can be exposed or given access to the images for maximum effect; and 5) people and society-at-large can thus be moved to action to correct the situation shown. Relevant aspects of these components of the Documentary will be discussed in the following pages.

The Documentary and Photography

The perception of photography as a medium which could be put to practical use in making a 'better world' has taken on various forms during its history. In the nineteenth century several examples appear which still find expression in today's use of the art. As early as the 1850's commentators remarked on the value of the photographic image for providing art education for the masses through the reproduction of the world's art treasures, formerly seen only by art historians or the privileged traveller [Buckland 1974: 23-24,30; Braive 1966: 324]. By this time as well Europeans could, as "armchair tourists," be exposed to the widening world of the nineteenth century through images brought back from North Africa, the Middle East and the little seen regions of their own continent [Braive 1966: 211]. As "the birth of photography coincided with the dawn of a global civilization" [Braive 1966: 31] it was put to use in acclimatizing Europeans to the places and peoples which were to be incorporated into and eventually change their world.

Photography has frequently been lauded and put to use during such times of social stress and change. It can be said to be put into operation at these times as a mechanism for coping with problems and events which are occurring at other levels of the cultural system (i.e.

political, economic). In a British magazine in 1871 this perception of photography's role in coping with the dislocations of that era's growing industrialization was glowingly expressed as follows:

Any one who knows what the worth of family affection is among the lower classes, and who has seen the array of little portraits stuck over a labourer's fireplace...will perhaps feel with me that in counteracting the tendencies, social and industrial, which every day are sapping the healthier family affections, the sixpenny photograph is doing more for the poor than all the philanthropists in the world.
[quoted in Scharf 1974: 331; ellipse in the source quoted]

During this same period one of the effects of the industrial era in the cities of England was the destruction of traditional architecture. In 1875 London photographers set to work, salvaging old buildings about to be torn down by preserving them in images and, at the same time, hoping to preserve a vanishing era by founding the Society for Photographing Relics of Old London.[Buckland 1974: 28].

Photographers were working in the United States at this time for similar ends. Westward expansion posed a threat to the unspoiled beauty of America's natural resources. Photographs taken by William H. Jackson in 1871 demonstrated the splendor of the Yellowstone area. Congressmen, impressed by the images, passed legislation making the region the first national park created in the

United States [Taft 1964: 302]. Some sixty years later, American photographers worked under the Farm Security Administration to photograph small rural towns before they vanished in the urban-industrial landscape [Hurley 1972]. Their efforts did not prevent change, but perhaps did lend a sentimental value to a passing era.

A similar and more recent effort, carried out from 1970 to 1972 by photographers Clara Gutsche and David Miller [1973], was designed to protest the demolition of one of Montreal's inner city areas. Both the photographs and the process of photographing were done in the hope of preventing change through arousing concern and action:

The process of photographing the area reached as many people as did the photographs themselves. A camera set up in front of a boarded-up house was an open invitation to any passerby to start a conversation about what was happening to the neighbourhood and what could be done about it. [Gutsche and Miller 1973: endpiece]

Perhaps inevitably, the community was dismantled and the images alone remain. As a mechanism for change they failed; as a testament to the past, with the now poignant title "You Don't Know What You've Got 'Til It's Gone", they attest to the frustrations of coping with power and change.

As seen in the examples above, photographic work as a part of the Documentary aims for a combination of real information about things and the evocation of their

true nature; a fusion of factual and emotional impact. As such, the image seeks the involvement of the viewer in an act of transference of feelings from the photographer to the viewer, now vicarious participant. Dorothea Lange, who worked for this goal, explains it as follows:

Whether of a board fence, an eggshell, a mountain peak or a broken sharecropper, the...photograph first asks, then answers, two questions: "Is that my world? What, if not, has that world to do with mine?" [quoted in Lyons 1966: 70]

Lange's sentiments were given concrete form with the creation of the International Fund for Concerned Photography, Incorporated, in 1966. This organization is designed to foster the 'activist' role of photography in contemporary society. Its founder and director, photographer Cornell Capa, has set its goals as follows:

To promote and sponsor the use of photography as a medium for revealing the human condition, commenting on the events on our time, and improving understanding among people. [Capa 1972: endpiece]

This is enunciated even more strongly in an affirmation of a quote the ICP has used from photographer W. Eugene Smith:

my camera, my intentions stopped no man from falling. Nor did they aid him after he had fallen. It could be said that photographs be damned for they bound no wounds. Yet, I reasoned, if my photographs could cause compassionate horror within the viewer, they might also prod the conscience of that viewer into taking action.

[quoted in Capa 1972: Preface]

Towards what subjects would Smith have us, the viewers, direct our attention? The photographers have overwhelmingly chosen the poor and/or culturally different as objects for "compassionate horror." Both are equally removed, as 'Others,' from the experiential world of the photographer and his designated audience. Transformed into aesthetic objects they are no longer 'socially real' but, rather, the creations of photographic imagery and authority. They are shaped by the cultural categories which determine who is appropriate for aesthetic transformation and who is to perform this mediating function.

In this selection of content, the documentary photographers make deliberate choices about what are to be made socially significant facts. These choices determine what is to be made socially significant and thus what is to be made visually significant. Those who become 'visible' in this sense become, by the same stroke, aesthetic phenomena. As Stott comments on the effect, from the 1930's onwards, of Walker Evans' images of the poor of America:

It is not too much to say that for many educated viewers of his time, Evans has made the lives of the lower classes aesthetically respectable (which is full respectability these days, so highly do we value "art"). [1973: 277]

The respectability of which Stott speaks is that abstract kind felt in the presence of art which, in turn, drives the content towards a peculiar, aesthetic invisibility.

Yet the determination to make the poor, the oppressed, the culturally different, 'visible' through the photographic image persists and has frequently been rationalized by commentators. For some, these subjects are seen as having some essentially human qualities which others ('we') have lost:

the poor, the primitive, the young...
are the natural heroes of photography;
all others have learned too much
disguise. [Stott 1973: 275]

This kind of Primitivist commentary sees simplicity as a human virtue and life (or particular lives, from a safe distance) as art:

Whereas the prosperous attenuate their selfhood through many possessions and roles, the poor condense theirs in a few. Their world and everything in it bespeaks them, symbolizes them: It is entirely a work of art. [Stott 1973: 275]

A second line of commentary essentially rationalizes the photographers' choice of subject matter as a technical problem of access:

But most of the people, adults and children, photographed on the streets of strange cities, are poor. For it is prevaillingly the poor of the world who gather on doorsteps, in parks, and on public beaches. They lack space indoors and have no gardens where their children can play safely under the trees. They lack walls to shut the stranger out of their lives. [Mead 1965: 11]

Access is, needless to say, a fundamental issue for the

photographer. You cannot photograph except by 'being there.' The truth about access, however, probably lies more in the fact that the poor have little power over who invades their environment. They have, historically, been unable to control rights of interpretation over their own lives.

Photographers, as representatives of the dominant culture or society, have been designated as interpreters of such lives. From this position, they wield the power to re-create the reality before the lens:

To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they have never seen themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have. To photograph is to turn people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. [Sontag 1973: 61]

Particularly in photographing the poor and the culturally different, the authority which the photographers hold should not be underestimated. They possess the 'camera knowledge' which their subjects do not. They know and control the ultimate image which will be created, its manner of presentation and its destination.

In this regard, as functionaries of their culture, they may enact a kind of 'aesthetic imperialism':

the camera is the ideal arm of consciousness in its acquisitive mood.

To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting

oneself in a certain relation to the
world that feels like knowledge —
and therefore, like power. [Sontag 1973: 59]

In transforming their subjects into aesthetic objects, photography is conditioned by the cultural rules and categories which prescribe who is 'eligible' for aesthetic transformation. As suggested earlier, these are overwhelmingly those who are relatively powerless. By mediating such people into the aesthetic domain, photography reflects and in turn reinforces the marginal position of the poor and the culturally different in relation to the cultural structures which control their lives. In documenting their lives, photography serves to entrench them in their marginality. Distanced in this manner, they may elicit nostalgia, compassion or reverence, but pose no threat to bring about change in the established order.

CHAPTER 6

PRIMITIVISM

Introduction

Primitivism is presented here as the third model for photographic work and, it is argued, the dominant framework for structuring the creation and perception of photographic imagery. As indicated in the preceeding chapters, the attributes of Primitivism also appear, and often dominate, within the frameworks of Realism and the Documentary. Because of the central role given to Primitivism in this analysis, this chapter will expand on the workings of this model to include a discussion of its anthropological function of creating theses on the nature of man and culture through the image. This will serve to return to the idea of the necessary relationship of aesthetic activity to other activities at the ideational level of culture, and to the 'extra-aesthetic' dimension of aesthetic creations which functions in concert with other cultural phenomena. The conclusions of Chapter 7 will then follow from these remarks.

The Nature of Primitivism

The "Primitivist Assumption" is presented here as the dominant model in photographic history. Robert Goldwater's pioneering study Primitivism in Modern Art [1967] sets down the nature and history of this transforming framework.

Goldwater's study is an inquiry into the absorption of "primitive art" into Western Europe in the late 1800's and its subsequent influence on her artists during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Yet Goldwater makes it clear that Primitivism is not to be taken only as the name for a "particular period or school in the history of painting" [1967: xxiv]. Rather, it is a more generalizable attitude or ideology which affects cultural and aesthetic phenomena. Goldwater demonstrates how objects are metamorphosed into both a material realm and an ideological domain. The artifacts from small-scale societies which found their way to Western Europe during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were subject to a particular kind of idealization.

Post-Darwinian European thought had become obsessed with a desire for the knowledge of origins, and a search for both the nature and essence of evolution. This took Europeans to other continents and other cultures to find

the secrets of man's 'purer' being, now corrupted in modern society. If one could not go backwards in time, there was the option of going 'backwards' across cultural distance through the study of non-European peoples and their artifacts. In the specific time period Goldwater analyzes, ethnologists and aestheticians formed the vanguard of this movement [Goldwater 1967: 15-43].

The ethnologist Leo Frobenius exemplified this commitment to retrieve the past when he travelled to Africa in the first decade of the twentieth century. His professed aim was "to assert the value of indigenous Black African culture" [Ita 1973: 311]. What he in fact constructed was a bi-polar typology of African societies that reflected, and was equated with, German versus Anglo-Saxon and French world views. As Ita remarks, his schema "has more to do with European romantic tradition than with empirical observation in Africa" [1973: 326]. The same bias appears in Frobenius' studies of African sculpture where he exhibits what Goldwater rather tactfully calls "extra-ethnological bias" [Goldwater 1967: 30]. Goldwater explains:

The later work of Leo Frobenius is a more striking example of the idealization of the art of primitive man. Before the turn of the century he had been among the first to study primitive, particularly African, sculpture.... But his later, wider-ranging theories, which make an explicit connection between primitive and modern art, have an

economic and political as well as an aesthetic motivation....Frobenius discovers a direct connection between the Faustian and the African soul... Only in Parsifal and in the Nigerland epics is there the conception of the fate-conquering individual; only the Occidental has the idea of the character-development of the individual who rises above the material forces around him.

[Goldwater 1967: 29]

Frobenius himself states the value of Africa as a primeval source and justification for German ideals and aspirations:

All [the work of the Orient] was essentially akin to the feminine French, but has been for us Germans, in every period of our expanding strength, the expression of an Oriental lethargy. How different our relation to this giant Africa! Our youth demands nature. The rediscovery of the oldest simple ties with nature, a return to naturalness. Art calls for simplification.

[quoted in Goldwater 1967: 29]

Frobenius, mentioned here as an example of his time, used the empirical world of persons and things, or the guise of 'scientific' research, to gain a knowledge of something beyond them. As Goldwater explains, Europe, especially in the person of her artists and ethnologists, was seeking some kind of purity, simplicity and a-historical universalism to human nature, history and experience. THIS CONSTITUTES THE PRIMITIVIST ASSUMPTION. It is a value judgement, an ideological stance and, most importantly, an attitude of the viewer rather than a quality of the object itself. It is the world observed through a perpetually self-reflecting mirror. And, in the case of

Frobenius, the image thus secured is constructed so as to serve as an essential or universal source and a vindication for the present. The contradiction is both inherent and obvious.

Primitivism is a quality of attribution, which seeks out its subject in the form of both people and things. Culturally distant objects and experiences, displaced from their specific cultural and existential context, are transformed into found symbols "of universal reference" [Goldwater 1967: 261]. Goldwater describes how the Primitivist Assumption grew out of the European frame of reference and, in turn, transformed its source of material. The European perception of the reality of the situation ran as follows:

after several centuries of denigration and destruction, European civilization is finally coming to an appreciation of non-European cultures. Today, when there is hardly anything left to destroy, we begin to doubt our own soulless civilization, and to realize "that we have lost what the primitive peoples, for so long despised, possessed to the highest degree: a world-view which encloses mankind and the All in a deeply felt unity" [Goldwater 1967: 39]

The perceived quality of "primitive" life was likewise attributed to its products. The Primitivist Assumption was conceived by societies on the search for essences, for the common denominators of human nature and experience. Its consequences should appear obvious:

This is the assumption that externals, whether those of a social or cultural group, of individual psychology, or of the physical world, are intricate and complicated and as such not desirable. It is the assumption that any reaching under the surface, if only it is carried far enough and proceeds according to the proper method, will reveal something "simple" and basic which, because of its very fundamentality and simplicity, will be more emotionally compelling than the superficial variations of the surface; and finally that the qualities of simplicity and basicness are things to be valued in and for themselves. In other words, it is the assumption that the further one goes back — historically, psychologically, or aesthetically — the simpler things become; and that because they are simpler they are more profound, more important, and more valuable. [Goldwater 1967: 251]

What Primitivism demands is the effacement of any specific cultural and historical identity on the part of its subject. It may appear that we have now reached the complete contradiction of Realism, but this is not so. Primitivism, in a real sense, is the logical partner to the philosophical tenants held by Realism. At heart, both are products of the interface of scientism and idealism. In their explicit ideology they are coming from opposite poles, yet they both work along the same continuum. Realism rejects traditional metaphysical schema and embraces the scientific ideal in a search for 'factual' truth. Primitivism mistrusts rationality and searches for intuitive truths and perceived essences. Realism creates a world based on the sheer weight of appearances, through

what Nochlin has called "phenomenological transcription" [1971: 182]. Primitivism abhors the specific and deletes all possible reference to the concreteness of its found world. Yet, as we have already seen, the actual working out of Realism led to a new myth to take the place of the discarded metaphysics. Scientism and empiricism provided a basis for a new faith, an undefiled vision of the potential dignity of man. A simple and essential vision. And Primitivism, while outwardly searching for basic truths about human experience and disparaging over modern society, grew out of and employed the aims and methods of the sciences. These include the use of on-the-scene accounts of "primitive" peoples (the empirical method), in the fashion of ethnological fieldwork, and an imitation and at times distortion of the work of the evolutionists.

Primitivism, it is argued, overrides and absorbs the models provided for photography in Realism and the Documentary. Briefly, the reasons for this effect can be given as follows: 1) Primitivism seems to best reflect the conditions and contradictions of the modern era; and 2) Primitivism most fully contains the promise of art and aesthetic experience. The former make it intellectually and logically satisfying; the latter makes it desirable.

Primitivism and Photography

Primitivism in photography needs to be approached from the understanding that the photographic image has been coveted as a means of revealing the unseen world of essences which lies beneath the surface of observable reality. From within this perspective photographer Edward Weston describes the powers which have been so highly valued by both the photographer and his audience:

The photographer's power lies in his ability to re-create his subject in terms of its basic reality, and present this re-creation in such a form that the spectator feels that he is seeing not just a symbol for the object, but the thing itself revealed for the first time. Guided by the photographer's selective understanding, the penetrating power of the camera eye can be used to produce a heightened sense of reality — a kind of super-realism that reveals the vital essence of things. [quoted in Lyons 1966: 154]

This belief in the ability of the camera to reveal the 'essence' of things is more a reflection of our own desire to see in the image a revelation (instantly produced and instantly informing) about the nature of things. Or, put another way, we will 'recognize' in the work a schema, or patterned representation of reality, which we have invoked to derive meaning from the image. As Sekula has pointed out, meaning is not derived from the photograph itself, but from a core of culturally determined conditions

and presuppositions [1975: 37]. The latter form what I have called the models of mediation, or the frameworks through which the photographer constructs the image and the viewer perceives meaning and motive in the photograph. When images are constructed from within the Primitivist Assumption, the viewer is directed towards the recognition of 'essences.' Photography has worked to achieve this goal by creating and structuring images which would evoke in the viewer some familiar awareness of the 'essence' of the subject.

It can be seen, for example, that even in photography's drive to Realism this need to perform a more profound and more idealized function constantly intrudes. When photographs first became available as a means of portraiture, their ability to capture the 'true' person in the surface sense of the term — warts, wrinkles and all — was lauded. Yet the nineteenth century photographer knew that such 'truthfulness' had to be counteracted, or mediated. In effect, reality would be transformed into art. These early portraits were taken in highly artificial and idealized studio settings and, later, the images themselves were placed in deliberately elaborate contexts: frames, fans, jewelry, chinaware, etc. As Braive notes: "Our ancestors clearly preferred their realism in an ornate setting" [1966: 41]. Re-established as art objects, the photographic image takes on the truth which is ascribed to art. It

becomes permanent and valuable rather than transitory and commonplace. It connotes the inner (essential) truth of art rather than the outer (empirical) truth of science [cf. Sekula 1975: 45].

This straining of the photograph to reveal essences is at the same time its drive towards the aesthetic domain. As aesthetic objects, images are thought to retrieve people from the realities of time and circumstance. It is also here that they perform a redemptive function. Judith Mara Gutman's commentary on the photographs of Lewis Hine shows how the people who stood before his camera early in this century face us now as aesthetic objects. They are redeemed from the past and are reconstituted, by us, in the more perfect form characteristic of essences: art.

These people exist today; and that existence overshadows their revelation of the past, though they "document" the past, they live in the present. And though they grew out of an historic reality, they produce an aesthetic reality. They have become timeless and universal and produce infinite realities that exist beyond particular moments in time. [Gutman 1967: 16]

Primitivism, Photography and Culture

The Primitivist Assumption can be traced as a dominant framework for structuring reality in social documentary photography. Among the earliest images are those of people culturally distant. Despite the cumbersome equipment of early photography, and the hazards and hardships of working in foreign locals, photographers sought to document and capture through the image the face of humanity.

During the 1840's and 1850's photographs taken in Scotland, France and Egypt served to benefit the "armchair tourists" [Braive 1966: 211]. These early photographs served other purposes as well. As for the painter William James Muller, photography proved a better instrument for capturing the exoticism of a foreign society:

In 1839 in Cairo he [Muller] described the multitudinous street scenes of the city with the utility of the new invention [photography] in mind. 'Let us imagine the poor artist,' he said, 'with his feelings of enthusiasm properly kindled, in such a crowd, and anxious to sketch. Poor devil! I pity him. He longs for some photogenic process to fix the scene before him.' [Scharf 1974: 80]

The following quote, while written some 130 years after Muller confronted Cairo, describes a similar feeling and a similar gratitude for the ability of the camera to transform chaos into order and to provide 'distance' from

the subject:

The complexity of modern urban visual phenomena does not lend itself to the self-absorbed contemplation of an artist before his subject with pencil and paper. The camera is a useful tool in recording visual phenomena under trying circumstances.

[Monte 1970: 12]

While the perception of chaos or complexity may alter with changing times and circumstances, the general need to "fix the scene" has been a constant if not basic feature of photography. In achieving this end the dynamic quality of ongoing experience is often sacrificed; a virtually inevitable effect, however, of the still camera, a synchronic medium. What is not inevitable is the extent to which photographers often chose to create an artificial sense of 'fixedness' by simplifying their subject. For Lewis Hine, who made this choice, such simplification is seen as a higher order of reality, as in the primitivist or aesthetic mode:

Whether it be a painting or photograph; the picture is a symbol that brings one immediately into close touch with reality ...In fact, it is often more effective than the reality would have been, because, in the picture, the non-essential and conflicting interests have been eliminated.

[quoted in Gutman 1967: 19]

Susan Sontag has written of this tendency for simplification in twentieth century photography, and her analysis holds equally well for the 1800's. She sees its

goal as the creation of a "spurious unity," and its motivations growing out of more complex cultural factors.

Our ...use of photographic images not only reflects but gives shape to our own society, one unified by the denial of conflict. Our very notion of the world — the capitalist twentieth century's "one world" — is like a photographic overview. The world is "one" not because it is united but because a tour of its diverse contents does not reveal conflict but only an even more astounding diversity. This spurious unity of the world is made more coherent when its contents are translated into images. Images are always compatible, or can be made compatible, even when the realities they depict are not. [Sontag 1977: 30]

The simplification of reality, the creation of a "spurious unity," and the symbolic or aesthetic transformation of peoples and lives are among the chief effects of Primitivism. The works of the photographers cited below achieve these ends and express the ideology of the governing framework. In so doing, they perform a process of metamorphosis — which is at the same time both aesthetic and cultural — that marks the Primitivist Assumption:

To sum up, it can perhaps be said that primitivism tends to expand the metaphor of art — by which is meant a well-defined object-form with a definite, precise and limited if intricate reference — until either by formal simplification or symbolic iconographic generalization, or both, it becomes a symbol of universal reference, and that this process is possible only on the basis of the primitivist assumption

[Goldwater 1967: 260-261]

Many of the photographers who travelled the Western frontier of the United States during the second half of the nineteenth century can be called Primitivists in their depiction of Native North Americans. The actual dress of the Indians was sometimes replaced, through the intervention of the photographer, with their more 'real' traditional garments, borrowed from museums or made to order from old patterns if necessary [Scherer 1975: 70]. To make their subjects appear more exotic, and hence more 'real,' photographers would sometimes paint over the glass negative to add body decoration in the form of paint and tatoos [Scherer 1975: 75-76]. What is demonstrated here on the part of photographers is the desire to portray something they have defined as "Indianness" or being 'really' Indian rather than the culturally specific world of the Paiute or the Omaha. This would seem to display the Primitivist Assumption. The complexity of living cultures is transformed into a more simple, universal and ahistorical structure, that of the aesthetic objects created by the Primitivist Assumption.

A paradigm of this mode of photography can be seen in the aptly titled photographic essay The Family of Man [Steichen 1955]. 503 images taken in 68 countries were assembled for this exhibition, perhaps the most well known and widely viewed of any group of photographic images. Edward Steichen, who formed the collection, explains its

purpose:

It was conceived as a mirror of the universal elements and emotions in the everydayness of life — as a mirror of the essential oneness of mankind throughout the world.

[Steichen 1955: Introduction]

The "everydayness of life" and the wide range of cultures shown in the images becomes merely a foil for 'uncovering' a more simple idea: "the essential oneness of mankind".

Jacques Barzun describes the quality of Primitivism in The Family of Man as follows:

Whatever is formed and constituted (the work seems to say), whatever is adult, whatever exerts power, whatever is characteristically Western, whatever is unique or has a name, or embodies the complexity of thought, is of less interest and worth than what is native, common, and sensual; what is weak and confused; what is unhappy, anonymous and elemental.

[1967: 95]

Morse Peckham [1972/1973: 28] sees in Steichen's work "a collection of icons of the reification Human Dignity" and goes on to explain:

The notions of Human Rights and Human Dignity clearly mark the Enlightenment mythology, still the dominating mythology of Western Europe and increasingly of the world, as a redemptive mythology.

By reuniting man in his 'common humanity' photography becomes something of a redemptive medium. Along these same lines "Humanism" is a word which also signifies the presence of the

Primitivist Assumption. Lewis Hine's images have been praised as "a timeless humanist art" in which he "just came closer and closer to that humanist essence that binds truth and beauty together" [Gutman 1967: 47,48]. In common to this class of images and commentary is the perceived need to 'elevate' human experience out of the boundaries of (cultural) space and time.

The elimination of cultural identities is also evident in the photographic essay Family [1965], one of several collaborative works by photographer Ken Hyman and anthropologist Margaret Mead. Family contains images from around the world, subdivided according to kinship and social relations (e.g. mothers, friends). By choosing this strategy, a universal schema overshadows the particularity of culture. Mead's introduction provides the rationale for the ideology behind the work and the choice of presentation:

These pictures are held together by a way of looking that has grown out of anthropology, a science in which all peoples, however contrasting in physique and culture, are seen as members of the same species, engaged in solving problems common to humanity.

As in our bodies we share our humanity, so also through the family we have a common heritage. This heritage provides us with a common language that survives and transcends all the differences in linguistic form, social organization, religious belief, and political ideology that divide men. And as men must now

irrevocably perish or survive together,
the task of each family is also the
task of all humanity. [Mead 1965: 10,11]

Primitivism as an ideological framework has played an important role in both anthropology and photography, and when the two fields work together they create a visual statement which is explicitly shaped and reinforced by a particular theory of culture; in the case at point, the one advanced by Mead. Rather than pointing out the value of the unique qualities of man's adaptation through culture, Mead and Hyman have chosen to emphasize the 'common' features of human experience. This is a deliberate choice, by photographer and anthropologist, of the message they wish to convey to the viewer.

In structuring the content and impact of the image itself, choices are made which again reinforce Primitivism as the governing framework. In both Family and The Family of Man images from various cultures are juxtaposed and thereby subordinated to a theme which directs the viewer to look for what is 'beneath' the variety of cultural and racial diversity: the essential oneness of Man. This is reinforced by printing the images according to a uniform format, of the same size, which further imposes a sense of sameness, or, in Sontag's words, a "spurious unity." Both works also employ one of the fundamental characteristics which drives the image towards Primitivism: minimizing



captioning or verbal explanation which would anchor the image in a specific historical, cultural and hence living context. As in the ideology of the Realists, things are to be shown rather than explained; the essential truth being seen as somehow self-evident. Without verbal directives, the image, especially with the passage of time, becomes a generalized presence and even more open to the readings of changing ideology and perception [see Keim 1963: 31]. Taken together, these elements combine to produce the aesthetic quality of such images. They likewise create an anthropological framework, an interpretation of the nature of man and culture, for the viewer. In the final two photographic works to be discussed, this convergence and complementarity of the aesthetic and the cultural within the framework of Primitivism comes through forcefully.

East 100th Street [1970] is a collection of Bruce Davidson's images of one street in Spanish Harlem, New York City. In this series of more than 120 photographs the viewer is presented with the men, women and children of the community: gathered at storefronts, sitting in rubble-strewn vacant lots, peering from behind the wire-enclosed windows of their apartments, and, in a recurring image, lying on beds in darkened rooms. These have been lauded as "extraordinary" images whose strength lies in

their ability to translate "raw experience" into "experience expressed as art" [Kramer 1970: 45; see supra, p.27].

The transformation of experience into the aesthetic domain is unmistakable here, as is the peculiar representation of human and cultural experience. What is questionable is whether or not this is to be approved of and sought after.

These are a series of highly formalized images, carefully and deliberately composed, where the emphasis is on the formal properties of tonality, texture and composition which is further heightened by the use of high-gloss paper and meticulous control over printing quality. Most images are rendered darkly, and the viewer must sometimes strain to make out the figures in the frame. Davidson has refused to comment on the reason for photographing black and dark-skinned people in such a manner. In one commentator's view, Davidson's use of darkness is seen as representative of an aesthetic derived from "historically and psychologically determined symbolism"

which equates darkness and mystery with insight and profundity. The extolling of darkness mirrors civilized man's attempt to escape from over-reason by returning to the depths of aboriginal knowledge and primordial fecundity. It also indicates man's fascination with the forbidden, his reaching for the distant and shadowy places of the world and self where perhaps the real power lies. [Green 1971: n.p.]

These words are not meant to speak for Davidson himself, but they are a valid statement of the ideology of

photography's critics who are equally part of the aesthetic network.. Taken as they are, the images themselves could imply such a commentary as well.

Davidson's photographs are presented without any verbal commentary whatsoever, in his desire to have the images "be silent and timeless" [Personal Communication, 1972]. An analysis of the content of the images would reinforce what we are led to see by their formal properties: that the lives of the people closes in upon itself. It is as if there were no passage of time, no action in space. No sense that this is a street in the midst of a city of eight million whose inhabitants work, ride the subway, have outside contacts and are part of a larger society. We are presented with a model of culture and community which we can call 'closed': hermetically sealed and suspended in time.

Achieving this end is not fortuitous; it is the result of the photographer's choices and intentions. For Davidson was not looking to document a particular way of life, but his vision of life itself. From the 'raw material' which this community provided, he saw himself as transforming it into "one man's vision of what was formerly a blank place" [Personal Communication, 1972]. In speaking of East 100th Street, Davidson says:

The fact is that this is where life is left in America.... Sometimes when I drive

from East Harlem to midtown, I go into a kind of depression. So many masks, so many walls. [Davidson, with Simon 1969: n.p.]

As Davidson has arranged it, the 'mask' of culture is indeed one that his subjects no longer wear. For some this is in fact an admirable condition:

Urban reality and cultural failure have stripped them of the veneers of luxury and the trappings of society. They have been pared down to their essential humanity. [Green 1971: n.p.]

What is significant about this statement is that it is not a commentary on the images but on the people themselves. Such is the power of the image to transform reality itself.

In Davidson's case we have the expression of a sense of nostalgia for something 'lost' and a searching for something 'real.' For him, it was a relatively short journey in space and time — perhaps fourteen city blocks and a trip cross-town from his apartment in New York City to reach East 100th Street. Irving Penn, in contrast, travelled thousands of miles in search of his 'primitives.'

Photographer Irving Penn has collected his images of peoples from five continents into a book with the unusual title Worlds In A Small Room [1974]. The "worlds" include those of the peoples of Peru, New Guinea, the Cameroons, Morocco, New York City and Paris. All have indeed been gathered into a "small room" — that of the

photographer's studio, usually a specially designed portable studio which Penn has carried on his travels. In each location, people are asked to step from their world into the world of the photographer. For Penn this was the realization of a long-standing dream:

I would often find myself daydreaming of being mysteriously deposited (with my ideal north-light studio) among the disappearing aborigines in remote parts of the earth. These remarkable strangers would come to me and place themselves in front of my camera, and in this clear north sky light I would make records of their physical presence. The pictures would survive us both, and at least to that extent something of their already dissolving cultures would be preserved forever. [1974: 7-8]

With his own studio, Penn could undoubtedly exercise greater aesthetic control over his images in terms of perfecting light conditions; he could also work in relatively familiar surroundings. The real significance of the setting within his studio for the viewer, however, is that it provides the ultimate 'frame' for his images. It forms a perspective, a boundary, and a context which unifies and circumscribes all content. Whether a New York City policeman, a New Guinean warrior, a Parisian pastry cook or a Berber shepherdess, all are seen in the same setting. The setting here is physical and visual, but its implications for rendering the cultural lives of the subjects are profound. Penn himself defines his objectives both in

terms of aesthetic presentation and cultural representation:

I have tried to find universal and timeless qualities...rather than to record accidental or transitory situations. At the same time, I am always sustained by the awareness of the documentary and historical value of these records...because tomorrow or next year much of what I photographed will be changed or gone forever.

[quoted in Time-Life Eds. 1971: 98]

Penn's repeated concern for the documentary or ethnographic value of his work is in striking contrast to the unequivocal and unabashedly aesthetic quality of the images themselves. The images are hauntingly beautiful, exuding an aloofness, a timelessness and a sense of isolation in space. The subjects' posture has been carefully arranged, many of them in the style of the Vogue fashion photos which Penn has spent much of his career creating. From my own experience, I would suggest that an anthropologist looking at these images would find something instantly 'wrong' — something dissonant, something out of whack. A second look would indicate that it is the 'body language' of the subjects which makes no (cultural) sense. An artificial aesthetic imposed on the subjects creates images which are cultural hybrids.

Furthermore, the "accidental and transitory situation" which has been eliminated from the frame is precisely the cultural setting of the subjects. Culture, in one sense, is a distraction for Penn; something to get away

from. In reading his commentaries one finds a continual opposition between what Penn sees as the setting within the studio and the cultural environment outside. Inside his domain the people are described as serious, somber, serene, patient, and facing him with concentration and silent dignity. Outside he finds impatience, chatter and noise, and noisy-play. "Isolating" the person within his studio then becomes the logical recourse. There, in Penn's words, the subjects "rose to the experience" [1974: 9].

Culture is likewise, in the classic expression of the Primitivist Assumption, something to get 'beneath' or 'beyond' as well as away from. In describing his work in the New Guinea highlands, Penn links these together as follows:

I wanted to get past the purely costume part of the tribal dressing-up and see what I could of the people underneath. The result was successful to an extent, because the experience of posing in a studio actually set up in their villages became for the highlanders a serious, somber, and revealing occasion. [1974: 66]

There is a real need to point out here the cultural inferiority which Penn imputes to the world of his subjects. Together with his sense of mission in 'preserving' these 'disappearing' peoples through his images, he appears to be preserving the White Man's Burden through a kind of aesthetic imperialism. As if these 'achievements' need to be compounded, one commentator has come forward with

the following praise of Penn's work:

By photographing Arab market women outside their market, a Berber shepherd girl without her flock, Penn eliminated the carnival quality that so often degrades photographs of the world's exotic people. Instead, a superb photographer has isolated his subjects and allowed them to be seen as human beings.

[Time-Life Eds. 1975: 212]

In performing this 'ultimate' service for the 'Others' of our world, Penn has performed an aesthetic transformation which is at the same time an act of cultural deprivation. He has stripped his subjects of their most profound identity as cultural beings, and he has denied his viewers real knowledge and understanding of other peoples.

CHAPTER 7

THE CULTURAL LENS: A PHOTOGRAPHIC ANTHROPOLOGY

The preceeding analysis has been based on one very simple premise: that photography matters. That the art of photography has made a significant impact on our perception and understanding of ourselves and our world. And that what is conveyed by the image should be a matter of concern because it has consequences that go beyond the visual to the cultural and ethical. This last point will be returned to again.

To set out this theory a number of key assumptions have been advanced. First is the recognition that photography is not 'merely' a visual medium but a profoundly cultural one. It is cultural in the sense that all art is inextricably linked into its particular cultural system and setting. It then follows that images contain and convey cultural concepts as well as those which are purely visual or aesthetic. As aesthetic phenomena, however, photography's nature and impact flow from the particular quality of aesthetic experience which is based on a sense of 'otherness' or distance from the object. Yet this process is also cultural in the sense that the subjects to be designated as aesthetic phenomena are determined by cultural choices as to what is 'appropriate' for the aesthetic domain. The aesthetic network then becomes a place in the cultural system where subjects can be "relegated to remoteness." It has been argued that photography has been used in this manner to transform

people and cultural lives into the aesthetic domain and thereby distance them from 'Ourselves' as a category of 'Others.' In the case of photography this transformation has been carried out largely in terms of people who are culturally different or socially marginal thus ensuring their categorization in both art and life as 'Others.' The implications of this extend to our conceptualization of the nature of man and culture and our relationships to 'other' people. The former is a question of cultural theory, the latter is one of ethics; both are related.

To analyse this process in specific terms it has been shown that photography emerged at a time in Western society when global exploration and developments in the natural and social sciences led to the 'discovery' of peoples formerly unknown or unacknowledged. Such peoples, now known, had to be accommodated into the cultural categories of the West. Many were 'promoted' into the aesthetic domain. Photography, being a highly mobile, reproducible and hence accessible art, played a major role in making this possible and continues to do so today.

The three models advanced to explain how photography has worked in this way are Realism, the Documentary and Primitivism. Because all have grown out of the same cultural setting they have worked in overlapping fashion and have been mutually supportive. Primitivism, however, has been set out as the dominant model for structuring

the production and perception of photographic work. In analysing the nature and effects of this model the interconnectedness of the aesthetic and the cultural is the strongest of the three, and this goes far to explain the power of Primitivism as a transforming framework.

It is from within the framework of Primitivism that the pseudo-anthropological role of photography in communicating concepts on the nature of man and culture is most evident. This role is in part explained by the fact that, as art, photography must necessarily convey cultural information. But in the case of Primitivism there are more specific and more interesting reasons to explain this process. One has already been pointed out by Robert Goldwater in terms of the kinship between ethnologists and aestheticians who worked together in the original formulation of the Primitivist Assumption and this collaboration has continued in both theory and practice. This must be acknowledged in order to elaborate on the implications of Primitivism as a photographic anthropology for the relationship between the two fields is not accidental.

Modern anthropology emerged at essentially the same time as photography and grew from the same set of historical circumstances and cultural cross-currents. As ideational phenomena, both photography and anthropology should share a similar set of ideological frameworks which would be mutually supportive. In analysing anthropology's

history and operating assumptions, Stanley Diamond [1964] has pointed to its "split Enlightenment inheritance" [1964: xxiii] which has produced three trends or schools in the discipline: the retrospective, the prospective, and applied anthropology or the action component. This presents a very interesting parallel with the three models offered for photography: Primitivism, Realism, and the Documentary, respectively. As major participants in the "global civilization" of the modern era, both photographers and anthropologists have shared in documenting mankind. They have especially shared an interest in exploring the 'exotic' cultures and minorities of the world: to document, to improve or salvage, and at times to escape into them and away from modern society. Often acting as the vanguard of Western Civilization, they have taken on the role of describing and defining man to man.

What both have confronted is the same question: who are these others, and who are we, now that we must define ourselves and the nature of man in the face of the others? Clifford Geertz [1965] has written that the definition of human nature has been the main problem facing the post-Enlightenment era. Faced with this challenge, refuge has often been sought in a kind of Primitivism:

They endeavor to construct an image of man as a model, an archetype, a Platonic

idea or an Aristotelian form, with respect to which actual men...are but reflections, distortions, approximations. In the Enlightenment case, the elements of this essential type were to be uncovered by stripping the trappings of culture away from actual men and seeing what then was left — natural man. In classical anthropology, it was to be uncovered by factoring out the commonalities in culture and seeing what then appeared — consensual man. In either case, the result is the same...the differences among individuals and among groups of individuals are rendered secondary....living detail is drowned in dead stereotype: we are in quest of a meta-physical entity, Man with a capital "M," in the interests of which we sacrifice the empirical entity we in fact encounter, man with the small "m." [Geertz 1965: 114-115]

In sacrificing the worlds of men, both anthropology and photography have chosen to undermine the reality of their subjects. In the case of photography, aesthetic transformation has made of man's most fundamental identity — culture — a thing to be denied. As Geertz defines it so well, "culture...is not just an ornament of human existence but — the principal basis of its specificity — an essential condition for it" [1965: 108].

Without taking fully into account the existential reality of others, we are denied understanding of ourselves as well. To follow Geertz again:

We must, in short, descend into detail, past the misleading tags, past the metaphysical types, past the empty similarities to grasp firmly the essential character of not only the various cultures but the various

individuals within each culture if we
wish to encounter humanity face to face.

[Geertz 1965: 117]

To perpetuate an idea of man and culture which seeks the reification of Man is never to encounter him at all. In working through an aesthetic model and an anthropological framework which does this, photography reflects the ethical problem of our age. For all art, ultimately, speaks of relations between man and man.

Postscript

This thesis has begun to explore some of the possibilities of an anthropological study of photography. Because of my conviction that this is an area of interest and importance, I would like to give a brief indication of other possibilities for research. Some of these subjects were at one time to have been a part of this thesis and were explored before the preceeding pages took their distinctive and theoretical bent. For another time, then, I would suggest the following ideas.

One of the concerns of this thesis was to remove some of the naivete about photography which exists in our society, so flooded with images yet so uncritical about the process which creates them and thus about their 'reading.' This naïveté, and a disinterest in encouraging critical analysis, is not only confined to some "general public." Photographers themselves often contribute to this tendency by saying little about their own work and by letting the image "speak for itself." This may mean as well that adequate information may not be available for thorough analysis.

Academic disciplines which have often made uncritical use of photographic imagery have recently begun to realize the complexities and potential hazards involved. In

sociology, Howard Becker [1974] has asked his colleagues and photographers themselves to pay more attention to acquiring a critical attitude towards photography and thus the possible use of its images by social scientists. In anthropology, Jay Ruby [1973] has argued against the naïveté of anthropologists in their own use of images in a piece aptly titled: "Up the Zambesi with Notebook and Camera or Being an Anthropologist Without Doing Anthropology ... With Pictures." We, too, seem to suspend our critical faculties when faced with the authoritative lens and the mystique of the camera. A New Guinean pig ceremony performed with utter ethnographic accuracy will not correct the ignorance of the maker behind the lens, nor will it have any inherently informing qualities for the viewer of the image.

A further examination of the links between photography and anthropology would be profitable for both fields. This could encompass their historical relationship, their attempts at collaboration, and their commonality of subject matter, methodology, aims and, at time, problems [cf. Kolodny 1974: 3-4].

Detailed analyses of individual works of photography would provide a deeper understanding of the entire photographic process. A complete examination of form as well as content would be mandatory in dealing with the image.

The photographer himself would be understood in terms of ideology, methodology and aims. Tracing the photographer's work 'down' the other levels of the cultural system would show the relationship of the aesthetic domain to other parts of the cultural system; e.g. patterns of distribution, support from political organizations, the role of benefactors, etc. In this way the photographic work would be seen, as it should, the final product of a complex process. Looking at photographic works as ethnographies [see Ruby 1977] might be in order for anthropologists who find this all looking a bit too much like foreign territory.

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