PENGUIN MODERN CLASSICS

Understanding a Photograph

John Berger was born in London in 1926. His acclaimed works of fiction and non-fiction include the seminal *Ways of Seeing* and the novel *G.*, which won the Booker Prize in 1972. In 1962 he left Britain permanently, and he now lives in a small village in the French Alps.

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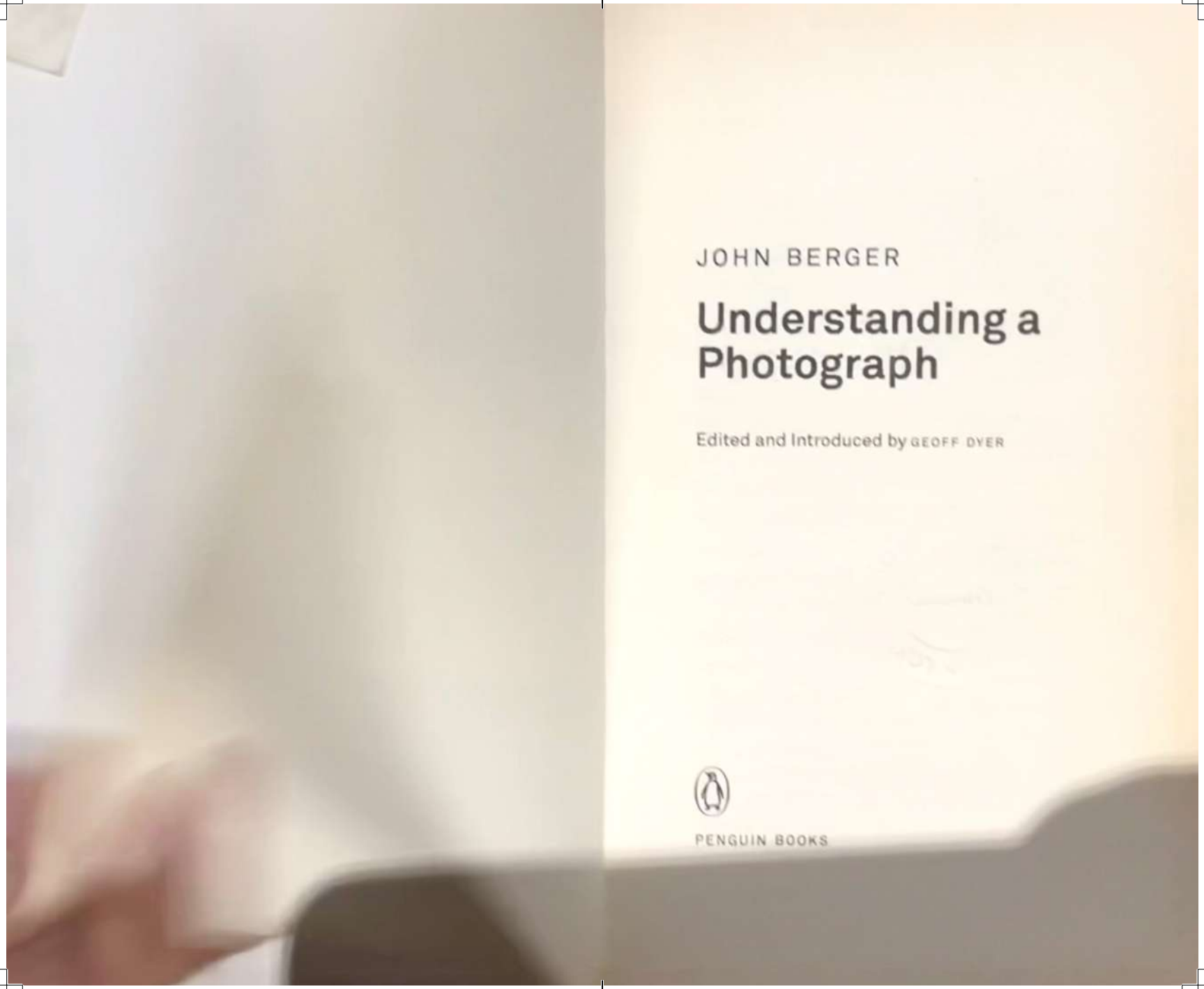

JOHN BERGER

Understanding a Photograph

Edited and Introduced by GEOFF DYER

PENGUIN BOOKS

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Introduction

I became interested in photography not by taking or looking at photographs but by reading about them. The names of the three writers who served as guides will come as no surprise: Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag and John Berger. I read Sontag on Diane Arbus before I'd seen any photographs by Arbus (there are no pictures in *On Photography*), and Barthes on André Kertész, and Berger on August Sander without knowing any photographs other than the few reproduced in *Camera Lucida* and *About Looking*. (The fact that the photo on the cover of *About Looking* was credited to someone called Garry Winogrand meant nothing to me.)

Berger was indebted to both of the others. Dedicated to Sontag, the 1978 essay 'Uses of Photography' is offered as a series of 'responses' to *On Photography*, published the previous year: 'The thoughts are sometimes my own, but all originate in the experience of reading her book' (p. 49). Writing about *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973), Berger described Barthes as 'the only living critic or theorist of literature and language whom I, as a writer, recognise'.[1]

For his part, Barthes included Sontag's *On Photography* in the list of books – omitted from the English edition – at the end of *Camera Lucida* (1980). Sontag, in turn, had been profoundly shaped by her reading of Barthes. All three had been influenced by Walter Benjamin whose 'A Small History of Photography' (1931) reads like the oldest surviving part of a map this later trio tried – in their different ways, using customized projections – to

extend, enhance and improve. Benjamin is a constantly flickering presence in much of Barthes' writing. The anthology of quotations at the end of *On Photography* is dedicated – with the kind of intimate relation to greatness that Sontag cultivated, adored and believed to be her due – 'to W. B.' At the end of the first part of *Ways of Seeing* Berger acknowledges that 'many of the ideas' had been taken from an essay of Benjamin's titled 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'. (This was 1972, remember, before Benjamin's essay became one of the most mechanically reproduced and quoted ever written.)

Photography, for all four, was an area of special interest, but not a specialism. They approached photography not with the authority of curators or historians of the medium but as essayists, writers. Their writings on the subject were less the product of accumulated knowledge than active records of how knowledge and understanding had been acquired or was in the process of being acquired.

This is particularly evident in the case of Berger, who did not devote an entire book to the subject until *Another Way of Telling* in 1982. In a sense, though, he was the one whose training and career led most directly to photography. Sontag had followed a fairly established path of academic study before becoming a freelance writer, and Barthes remained in academia for his entire career. Berger's creative life, however, was rooted in the visual arts. Leaving school possessed by a single idea – 'I wanted to draw naked women. All day long'[2] – he attended the Chelsea and Central Schools of Art. In the early 1950s he began writing about art and became a regular critic – iconoclastic, Marxist, much admired, often derided – for the *New Statesman*. His first novel, *A Painter of Our Time* (1958), was a direct result of his immersion in the world of art and the politics of the left. By the mid-1960s he had widened his scope far beyond art *and* the novel to become a writer unhindered by category and genre. Crucially, for the current discussion, he had begun collaborating with a photographer, Jean Mohr. Their first

book, *A Fortunate Man* (1967), made a significant step beyond the pioneering work of Walker Evans and James Agee in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), on rural poverty in the Great Depression. (*A Fortunate Man* is subtitled 'The Story of a Country Doctor', in homage, presumably, to the great photo essay by W. Eugene Smith, 'Country Doctor', published in *Life* in 1948.) This was followed by their study of migrant labour, *A Seventh Man* (1975), and, eventually, *Another Way of Telling*. The important thing, in all three books, is that the photographs are not there to illustrate the text, and, conversely, the text is not intended to serve as any kind of extended caption for the images. Rejecting what Berger regards as a kind of 'tautology', words and image exist, instead, in an integrated, mutually enhancing relationship. A new form was being forged and refined.

A side-effect of this ongoing relationship with Mohr was that Berger had, for many years, not only observed Mohr at work; he had also been the subject of that work. Lacking the training as a photographer that he'd enjoyed as an artist he became very familiar with the other side of the experience, of being photographed. With the exception of one picture, by another friend – Henri Cartier-Bresson! – the author photographs on his books have almost always been by Mohr; they constitute Mohr's visual biography of his friend. (The essay on Mohr included here records Berger's attempt to reciprocate, to make a sketch of the photographer.) His writings on drawing speak with the authority of the drawer; his writings on photography often concentrate on the experience, the depicted lives, of those photographed. Barthes expressed the initial impetus for *Camera Lucida* as photography '*against* film';[3] Berger's writing on photography hinges on its relationship to painting and drawing. As Berger has grown older, his early training – in drawing – rather than fading in importance has become a more and more trusted tool of investigation and inquiry. (Tellingly, his latest book, published in 2011 and inspired in part by Spinoza, is called *Bento's*

Sketchbook.) A representative passage in 'My Beautiful' records how, in a museum in Florence, he came across the porcelain head of an angel by Luca della Robbia: 'I did a drawing to try to understand better the expression of her face' (p. 200). Could this be part of the fascination of photography for Berger? Not just that it is a wholly different form of image production, but that it is immune to explication by drawing? A photograph *can* be drawn, obviously, but how can its meaning best be *drawn out*?

This was the goal Barthes and Berger shared: to articulate the essence of photography – or, as Alfred Stieglitz had expressed it in 1914, 'the *idea* photography'.[4] While this ambition fed, naturally enough, into photographic theory, Berger's method was always too personal, the habits of the autodidact too ingrained, to succumb to the kind of discourse- and semiotics-mania that seized cultural studies in the 1970s and '80s. Victor Burgin – to take a representative figure of the time – had much to learn from Berger; Berger comparatively little from Burgin. After all, by the time of *About Looking* (1980), the collection that contained some of his most important essays on photography, Berger had been living in the Haute-Savoie for the best part of a decade. His researches – I let the word stand in spite of being so thoroughly inappropriate – into photography proceeded in tandem with the struggle to gain a different kind of knowledge and understanding: of the peasants he had been living among and was writing about in the trilogy *Into Their Labours*. Except, of course, the knowledge and methods were not so distinct after all. Writing the fictional lives of Lucie Cabrol or Boris – in *Pig Earth* (1979) and *Once in Europa* (1987), the first two volumes of the trilogy – or about Paul Strand's photograph of Mr Bennett (p. 46), both required the kind of attentiveness celebrated by D. H. Lawrence in his poem 'Thought':

> Thought is gazing on to the face of life, and reading what can be read,

> Thought is pondering over experience, and coming to a conclusion.
> Thought is not a trick, or an exercise, or a set of dodges,
> Thought is a man in his wholeness wholly attending.[5]

In Berger's case, the habit of thought is like a sustained and disciplined version of something that had come instinctively to him as a boy. In *Here is Where We Meet* the author's mother remembers him as a child on a tram in Croydon: 'I never saw anyone look as hard as you did, sitting on the edge of the seat.'[6] If the boy ended up becoming a 'theorist', then it is by adherence to the method described by Goethe, quoted by Benjamin (in 'A Small History') and re-quoted by Berger in 'The Suit and the Photograph': 'There is a delicate form of the empirical which identifies itself so intimately with its object that it thereby becomes theory' (p. 36).[7]

This is what makes Berger such a wonderful practical critic and reader of individual photographs ('gazing on to the face of life, and reading what can be read'), questioning them with his signature intensity of attention – and, often, tenderness. (See, for example, the analysis of Kertész's picture 'A Red Hussar Leaving, June 1919, Budapest', p. 74.) To that extent his writing on photography continues the interrogation of the visible that characterized his writing on painting. As he explains at the beginning of the conversation with Sebastião Salgado: 'I try to put into words what I see' (p. 169).

In 1960 Berger had defined his aesthetic criteria simply and confidently: 'does this work help or encourage men to know and claim their social rights?'[8] Consistent with this, his writing on photography was from the start – from the essay on Che Guevara of 1967, 'Image of Imperialism' – avowedly and unavoidably political. (Which meant, in 'Photographs of Agony', of 1972, he could argue that pictures of war and famine which *seemed* political often served to remove the suffering depicted from the political decisions that

brought it about into an unchangeable and apparently permanent realm of the human condition.) Naturally, he has gravitated towards political, documentary or 'campaigning' photographers, but the range is wide and the notion of political never reducible to what the Indian photographer Raghubir Singh called 'the abject as subject'.[9] In 'The Suit and the Photograph' Sander's image of three peasants going to a dance becomes the starting point for the history of the suit as an idealization of 'purely *sedentary* power' (p. 41) and an illustration of Gramsci's notion of hegemony. (As with Benjamin's 'Work of Art', remember that this was the 1970s, almost twenty years before Gore Vidal informed Michael Foot that 'the young, even in America, are reading Gramsci'.[10]) Lee Friedlander, the least theory-driven of photographers, once commented on how much stuff – how much unintended information – accidentally ended up in his pictures. 'It's a generous medium, photography,' he concluded drily.[11] 'The Suit and the Photograph' is an object lesson in how much information is there to be discovered and revealed even in photographs lacking the visual density of Friedlander's. It's also exemplary, reminding us that many of the best essays are also journeys, epistemological journeys that take us beyond the moment depicted, often beyond photography – and sometimes back again. In 'Between Here and Then', written for an exhibition by Marc Trivier in 2005, Berger mentions the photographs only briefly before telling a story about an old and beloved clock, how the sound of its ticking makes the kitchen where he lives breathe. The clock breaks (is actually broken by the author in what must have been a furious moment of temporal slapstick), Berger takes it to a mender only to find . . . Well, that would spoil the story but, at the end, as well as a literal return there is also a coming together, a tacit exchange of greetings between Berger and Barthes, who wrote, in one of the most beautiful passages of *Camera Lucida*:

> For me the noise of Time is not sad: I love bells, clocks, watches – and I recall that at first photographic implements were related to techniques of cabinetmaking and the machinery of precision: cameras, in short, were clocks for seeing, and perhaps in me someone very old still hears in the photographic mechanism the living sound of the wood.[12]

This is a glimpse of Barthes the novelist in exquisite miniature. Berger's critical writing, meanwhile, has gone hand in hand with the creation of a substantial body of fiction. As Berger examines and coaxes out a photograph's stories – both the ones it reveals and those that lie concealed – so the task of the critic and interrogator of images gives way to the vocation and embrace of the storyteller. And it does not stop there, since, as he reminds us in *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos*, 'the traffic between storytelling and metaphysics is continuous'.[13]

The essays in this book are arranged more or less chronologically. They comprise selections from books by Berger and previously uncollected pieces written for exhibitions or as introductions and afterwords to catalogues. A few very minor mistakes have been silently corrected and some other very small changes have been made to eliminate discrepancies resulting from the pieces having gone through the different wash cycles of previous house styles. All of the pieces would benefit from being more comprehensively illustrated. This is more of a problem, obviously, than it was when a given piece appeared in a book filled with large, high-quality reproductions. It is less of a problem now than it was back in the time of Sontag's *On Photography* since so many of the pictures can be found instantly online, can even be viewed on the same device on which this book may be read. Having said that, it bears repeating that *Another Way of Telling* was conceived as a collaboration. The images are as important as the words. In the essays included here ('Appearances' and

Geoff Dyer
Iowa City, August 2012

Notes

Understanding a Photograph

Image of Imperialism

On Tuesday 10 October 1967, a photograph was transmitted to the world to prove that Guevara had been killed the previous Sunday in a clash between two companies of the Bolivian army and a guerrilla force on the north side of the Rio Grande River near a jungle village called Higueras. (Later this village received the proclaimed reward for the capture of Guevara.) The photograph of the corpse was taken in a stable in the small town of Vallegrande. The body was placed on a stretcher and the stretcher was placed on top of a cement trough.

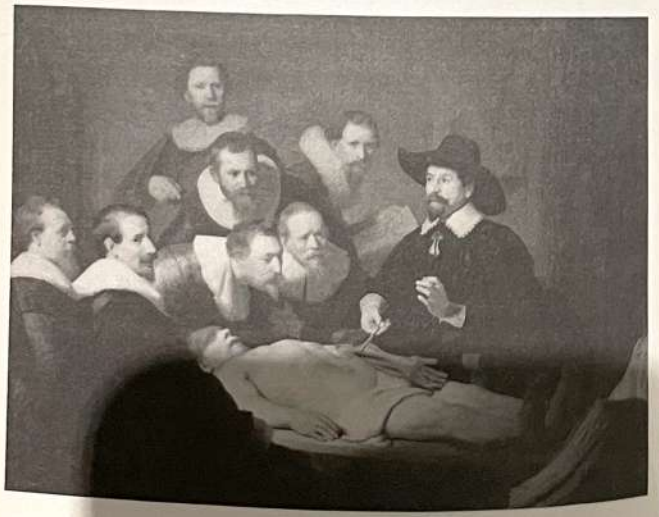
During the preceding two years 'Che' Guevara had become legendary. Nobody knew for certain where he was. There was no incontestable evidence of anyone having seen him. But his presence was constantly assumed and invoked. At the head of his last statement – sent from a guerrilla base 'somewhere in the world' to the Tricontinental Solidarity Organization in Havana – he quoted a line from the nineteenth-century revolutionary poet José Martí: 'Now is the time of the furnaces, and only light should be seen.' It was as though in his own declared light Guevara had become invisible and ubiquitous.

Now he is dead. The chances of his survival were in inverse ratio to the force of the legend. The legend had to be nailed. 'If,' said *The New York Times*, 'Ernesto Che Guevara was really killed in Bolivia, as now seems probable, a myth as well as a man has been laid to rest.'

We do not know the circumstances of his death. One can gain some idea of the mentality of those into whose hands he fell by their treatment of his body after his death. First they hid it. Then they displayed it. Then they buried it in an anonymous grave in an unknown place. Then they disinterred it. Then they burnt it. But before burning it, they cut off the fingers for later identification. This might suggest that they had serious doubts whether it was really Guevara whom they had killed. Equally it can suggest that they had no doubts but feared the corpse. I tend to believe the latter.

The purpose of the photograph of 10 October was to put an end to a legend. Yet on many who saw it its effect may have been very different. What is its meaning? What, precisely and unmysteriously, does this photograph mean now? I can but cautiously analyse it as regards myself.

There is a resemblance between the photograph and Rembrandt's painting of *The Anatomy Lesson of Doctor Nicolaes Tulp*. The immaculately dressed Bolivian colonel with a handkerchief to his nose has



taken the doctor's place. The two figures on his right stare at the cadaver with the same intense but impersonal interest as the two nearest doctors to the left of Doctor Tulp. It is true that there are more figures in the Rembrandt – as there were certainly more men, unphotographed, in the stable at Vallegrande. But the placing of the corpse in relation to the figures above it, and in the corpse the sense of global stillness – these are very similar.

Nor should this be surprising, for the function of the two pictures is similar: both are concerned with showing a corpse being formally and objectively examined. More than that, both are concerned with *making an example of the dead*: one for the advancement of medicine, the other as a political warning. Thousands of photographs are taken of the dead and the massacred. But the occasions are seldom formal ones of demonstration. Doctor Tulp is demonstrating the ligaments of the arm, and what he says applies to the normal arm of every man. The colonel with the handkerchief is demonstrating the final fate – as decreed by 'divine providence' – of a notorious guerrilla leader, and what he says is meant to apply to every guerrillero on the continent.

I was also reminded of another image: Mantegna's painting of the dead Christ, now in the Brera at Milan. The body is seen from the same height, but from the feet instead of from the side. The hands are in identical positions, the fingers curving in the same gesture. The drapery over the lower part of the body is creased and formed in the same manner as the blood-sodden, unbuttoned, olive-green trousers on Guevara. The head is raised at the same angle. The mouth is slack of expression in the same way. Christ's eyes have been shut, for there are two mourners beside him. Guevara's eyes are open, for there are no mourners: only the colonel with the handkerchief, a US intelligence agent, a number of Bolivian soldiers and the journalists. Once again, the similarity need not surprise. There are not so many ways of laying out the criminal dead.

Yet this time the similarity was more than gestural or functional. The emotions with which I came upon that photograph on the front page of the evening paper were very close to what, with the help of historical imagination, I had previously assumed the reaction of a contemporary believer might have been to Mantegna's painting. The power of a photograph is comparatively short-lived. When I look at the photograph now, I can only reconstruct my first incoherent emotions. Guevara was no Christ. If I see the Mantegna again in Milan, I shall see in it the body of Guevara. But this is only because in certain rare cases the tragedy of a man's death completes and exemplifies the meaning of his whole life. I am acutely aware of that about Guevara, and certain painters were once aware of it about Christ. That is the degree of emotional correspondence.

The mistake of many commentators on Guevara's death has been to suppose that he represented only military skill or a certain revolutionary strategy. Thus they talk of a setback or a defeat. I am in no position to assess the loss which Guevara's death may mean to the revolutionary movement of South America. But it is certain that Guevara represented and will represent more than the details of his plans. He represented a decision, a conclusion.

Guevara found the condition of the world as it is intolerable. It had only recently become so. Previously, the conditions under which two-thirds of the people of the world lived were approximately the same as now. The degree of exploitation and enslavement was as great. The suffering involved was as intense and as widespread. The waste was as colossal. But it was not intolerable because the full measure of the truth about these conditions was unknown – even by those who suffered it. Truths are not constantly evident in the circumstances to which they refer. They are born – sometimes late. This truth was born with the struggles and wars of national liberation. In the light of the newborn truth, the significance of imperialism changed. Its demands were seen to be different. Previously it had demanded cheap raw materials, exploited labour and a controlled world market. Today it demands a mankind that counts for nothing.

Guevara envisaged his own death in the revolutionary fight against this imperialism.

> Wherever death may surprise us, let it be welcome, provided that this, our battle-cry, may have reached some receptive ear and another hand may be extended to wield our weapons and other men be ready to intone the funeral dirge with the staccato chant of the machine-gun and new battle-cries of war and victory.[1]

1 'Vietnam Must Not Stand Alone', *New Left Review*, London, no. 43, 1967.

His envisaged death offered him the measure of how intolerable his life would be if he accepted the intolerable condition of the world as it is. His envisaged death offered him the measure of the necessity of changing the world. It was by the licence granted by his envisaged death that he was able to live with the necessary pride that becomes a man.

At the news of Guevara's death, I heard someone say: 'He was the world symbol of the possibilities of one man.' Why is this true? Because he recognized what was intolerable for man and acted accordingly.

The measure by which Guevara had lived suddenly became a unit which filled the world and obliterated his life. His envisaged death became actual. The photograph is about this actuality. The possibilities have gone. Instead there is blood, the smell of formol, the untended wounds on the unwashed body, flies, the shambling trousers: the small private details of the body rendered in dying as public and impersonal and broken as a razed city.

Guevara died surrounded by his enemies. What they did to him while he was alive was probably consistent with what they did to him after he was dead. In his extremity he had nothing to support him but his own previous decisions. Thus the cycle was closed. It would be the vulgarest impertinence to claim any knowledge of his experience during that instant or that eternity. His lifeless body, as seen in the photograph, is the only report we have. But we are entitled to deduce the logic of what happens when the cycle closes. Truth flows in the obverse direction. His envisaged death is no more the measure of the necessity for changing the intolerable condition of the world. Aware now of his actual death, he finds in his life the measure of his justification, and the world-as-his-experience becomes tolerable to him.

The foreseeing of this final logic is part of what enables a man or a people to fight against overwhelming odds. It is part of the

secret of the moral factor which counts as three to one against weapon power.

The photograph shows an instant: that instant at which Guevara's body, artificially preserved, has become a mere object of demonstration. In this lies its initial horror. But what is it intended to demonstrate? Such horror? No. It is to demonstrate, at the instant of horror, the identity of Guevara and, allegedly, the absurdity of revolution. Yet by virtue of this very purpose, the instant is transcended. The life of Guevara and the idea or fact of revolution immediately invoke processes which preceded that instant and which continue now. Hypothetically, the only way in which the purpose of those who arranged for and authorized the photograph could have been achieved would have been to preserve artificially at that instant the whole state of the world as it was: to stop life. Only in such a way could the content of Guevara's living example have been denied. As it is, either the photograph means nothing because the spectator has no inkling of what is involved, or else its meaning denies or qualifies its demonstration.

I have compared it with two paintings because paintings, before the invention of photography, are the only visual evidence we have of how people saw what they saw. But in its effect it is profoundly different from a painting. A painting, or a successful one at least, comes to terms with the processes invoked by its subject matter. It even suggests an attitude towards those processes. We can regard a painting as almost complete in itself.

In face of this photograph we must either dismiss it or complete its meaning for ourselves. It is an image which, as much as any mute image ever can, calls for decision.

October 1967

Prompted by another recent newspaper photograph, I continue to consider the death of 'Che' Guevara.

Until the end of the eighteenth century, for a man to envisage his death as the possibly direct consequence of his choice of a certain course of action is the measure of his *loyalty* as a servant. This is true whatever the social station or privilege of the man. Inserted between himself and his own meaning there is always a power to which his only possible relationship is one of service or servitude. The power may be considered abstractly as Fate. More usually it is personified in God, King or the Master.

Thus the choice which the man makes (the choice whose foreseen consequence may be his own death) is curiously incomplete. It is a choice submitted to a superior power for acknowledgement. The man himself can only judge *sub judice*: finally it is he who will be judged. In exchange for this limited responsibility he receives benefits. The benefits can range from a master's recognition of his courage to eternal bliss in heaven. But in all cases the ultimate decision and the ultimate benefit are located as exterior to his own self and life. Consequently death, which would seem to be so definitive an *end*, is for him a *means*, a treatment to which he submits for the sake of some aftermath. Death is like the eye of a needle through which he is threaded. Such is the mode of his heroism.

The French Revolution changed the nature of heroism. (Let it be clear that I do not refer to specific courages: the endurance of pain or torture, the will to attack under fire, the speed and lightness of movement and decision in battle, the spontaneity of mutual aid under danger – these courages must be largely defined by physical experience and have perhaps changed very little. I refer only to the choice which may precede these other courages.) The French Revolution brings the King to judgement and condemns him.

Saint-Just, aged twenty-five, in his first speech to the Convention argues that monarchy is crime, because the King usurps the sovereignty of the people.

> It is impossible to reign innocently: the madness of it is too clear. Every king is a rebel and a usurper.[2]

It is true that Saint-Just serves – in his own mind – the General Will of the people, but he has freely chosen to do so because he believes that the people, if allowed to be true to their own nature, embody Reason and that their Republic represents Virtue.

> In the world there are three kinds of infamy with which Republican virtue can reach no compromise: the first are kings: the second is the serving of kings: the third is the laying down of arms while there still exists anywhere a master and a slave.[3]

It is now less likely that a man envisages his own death as the measure of his loyalty as a servant to a master. His envisaged death is likely to be the measure of his love of Freedom: a proof of the principle of his own liberty.

Twenty months after his first speech Saint-Just spends the night preceding his own execution writing at his desk. He makes no active attempt to save himself. He has already written:

> Circumstances are only difficult for those who draw back from the grave . . . I despise the dust of which I am composed, the dust which is speaking to you: anyone can pursue and put an end to this dust. But I defy anybody to snatch from me what I have given myself, an independent life in the sky of the centuries.[4]

'What I have given myself'. The ultimate decision is now located within the self. But not categorically and entirely; there is a certain

2 Saint-Just, *Discours et rapports* (Paris: Éditions Sociales, 1957), p. 66 (translation by the author).
3 Ibid., p. 90.
4 Ibid.

ambiguity. God no longer exists, but Rousseau's Supreme Being is there to confuse the issue by way of a metaphor. The metaphor allows one to believe that the self will share in the historical judgement of one's own life. 'An independent life in the sky' of historical judgement. There is still the ghost of a pre-existent order.

Even when Saint-Just is declaring the opposite – in his defiant last speech of defence for Robespierre and himself – the ambiguity remains:

> Fame is an empty noise. Let us put our ears to the centuries that have gone: we no longer hear anything; those who, at another time, shall walk among our urns, shall hear no more. The good – that is what we must pursue, whatever the price, preferring the title of a dead hero to that of a living coward.[5]

But in life, as opposed to the theatre, the dead hero never hears himself so called. The political stage of a revolution often has a theatrical, because exemplary, tendency. The world watches to learn.

> Tyrants everywhere looked upon us because we were judging one of theirs; today when, by a happier destiny, you are deliberating on the liberty of the world, the people of the earth who are the truly great of the earth will, in their turn, watch you.[6]

Yet, notwithstanding the truth of this, there is, philosophically, a sense in which Saint-Just dies triumphantly trapped within his 'stage' role. (To say this in no way detracts from his courage.)

Since the French Revolution, the bourgeois age. Among those few who envisage their own death (and not their own fortunes) as the direct consequence of their principled decisions, such marginal ambiguity disappears.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid. Saint-Just to the Convention, on the Constitution.

The confrontation between the living man and the world as he finds it becomes total. There is nothing exterior to it, not even a principle. A man's envisaged death is the measure of his refusal to accept what confronts him. There is nothing beyond that refusal.

The Russian anarchist Voinarovsky, who was killed throwing a bomb at Admiral Dubassov, wrote:

> Without a single muscle on my face twitching, without saying a word, I shall climb on the scaffold – and this will not be an act of violence perpetrated on myself, it will be the perfectly natural result of all that I have lived through.[7]

He envisages his own death on the scaffold – and a number of Russian terrorists at that time died exactly as he describes – as though it were the peaceful death of an old man. Why is he able to do this? Psychological explanations are not enough. It is because he finds the world of Russia, which is comprehensive enough to seem like the whole world, intolerable. Not intolerable to him personally, as a suicide finds the world, but intolerable *per se*. His foreseen death 'will be the perfectly natural result' of all that he has lived through in his attempt to change the world, because the foreseeing of anything less would have meant that he found the 'intolerable' tolerable.

In many ways the situation (but not the political theory) of the Russian anarchists at the turn of the century prefigures the contemporary situation. A small difference lies in 'the world of Russia' *seeming* like the whole world. There was, strictly speaking, an alternative beyond the borders of Russia. Thus, in order to destroy this alternative and make Russia a world unto itself, many of the anarchists were drawn towards a somewhat mystical patriotism.

7 Quoted in Albert Camus, *The Rebel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1963), p. 140.

Today there is no alternative. The world is a single unit, and it has become intolerable.

Was it ever more tolerable? you may ask. Was there ever less suffering, less injustice, less exploitation? There can be no such audits. It is necessary to recognize that the intolerability of the world is, in a certain sense, an historical achievement. The world was not intolerable so long as God existed, so long as there was the ghost of a pre-existent order, so long as large tracts of the world were unknown, so long as one believed in the distinction between the spiritual and the material (it is there that many people still find their justification in finding the world tolerable), so long as one believed in the natural inequality of man.

The photograph shows a South Vietnamese peasant being interrogated by an American soldier. Shoved against her temple is the muzzle of a gun, and, behind it, a hand grasps her hair. The gun, pressed against her, puckers the prematurely old and loose skin of her face.

In wars there have always been massacres. Interrogation under threat or torture has been practised for centuries. Yet the meaning to be found – even via a photograph – in this woman's life (and by now her probable death) is new.

It will include every personal particular, visible or imaginable: the way her hair is parted, her bruised cheek, her slightly swollen lower lip, her name and all the different significations it has acquired according to who is addressing her, memories of her own childhood, the individual quality of her hatred of her interrogator, the gifts she was born with, every detail of the circumstances under which she has so far escaped death, the intonation she gives to the name of each person she loves, the diagnosis of whatever medical weakness she may have and their social and economic causes, everything that she opposes in her subtle mind to the muzzle of the gun jammed against her temple. But it will also include global truths: no violence has been so intense, so widespread or has continued for so long as that inflicted by the imperialist countries upon the majority of the world: the war in Vietnam is being waged to destroy the example of a united people who resisted this violence and proclaimed their independence: the fact that the Vietnamese are proving themselves invincible against the greatest imperialist power on earth is a proof of the extraordinary resources of a nation of 32 million: elsewhere in the world the resources (such resources include not only materials and labour but the possibilities of each life lived) of our 2,000 millions are being squandered and abused.

It is said that exploitation must end in the world. It is known that exploitation increases, extends, prospers and becomes ever more ruthless in defence of its right to exploit.

Let us be clear: it is not the war in Vietnam that is intolerable: Vietnam confirms the intolerability of the present condition of the world. This condition is such that the example of the Vietnamese people offers hope.

Guevara recognized this and acted accordingly. The world is not intolerable until the possibility of transforming it exists but is denied. The social forces historically capable of bringing about the transformation are – at least in general terms – defined. Guevara chose to identify himself with these forces. In doing so he was not submitting to so-called 'laws' of history but to the historical nature of his own existence.

His envisaged death is no longer the measure of a servant's loyalty, nor the inevitable end of an heroic tragedy. The eye of death's needle has been closed – there is nothing to thread through it, not even a future (unknown) historical judgement. Provided that he makes no transcendental appeal and provided that he acts out of the maximum possible consciousness of what is knowable to him, his envisaged death has become the measure of the parity which can now exist between the self and the world: it is the measure of his total commitment and his total independence.

Understanding a Photograph

For over a century, photographers and their apologists have argued that photography deserves to be considered a fine art. It is hard to know how far the apologetics have succeeded. Certainly the vast majority of people do not consider photography an art, even while they practise, enjoy, use and value it. The argument of apologists (and I myself have been among them) has been a little academic.

It now seems clear that photography deserves to be considered as though it were not a fine art. It looks as though photography (whatever kind of activity it may be) is going to outlive painting and sculpture as we have thought of them since the Renaissance. It n[illegible]eems fortunate that few museums have had sufficient ini[illegible] open photographic departments, for it means that few [illegible]phs have been preserved in sacred isolation, it means that th[illegible]e have not come to think of any photographs as being he[illegible]em. (Museums function like homes of the nobility to w[illegible]e public at certain hours are admitted as visitors. The [illegible]ire of the 'nobility' may vary, but as soon as a work is [illegible] museum it acquires the *mystery* of a way of life which [illegible]he mass.)

[illegible] be clear. Painting and sculpture as we know them are [illegible] of any stylistic disease, of anything diagnosed by the [illegible]ally lamented as cultural decadence; they are dying because, [illegible] as it is, no work of art can survive and not become [illegible]ble property. And this implies the death of painting and

understood paradox of the photograph. The photograph is an automatic record through the mediation of light of a given event: yet it uses the *given* event to *explain* its recording. Photography is the process of rendering observation self-conscious.

We must rid ourselves of a confusion brought about by continually comparing photography with the fine arts. Every handbook on photography talks about composition. The good photograph is the well-composed one. Yet this is true only in so far as we think of photographic images imitating painted ones. Painting is an art of arrangement: therefore it is reasonable to demand that there is some kind of order in what is arranged. Every relation between forms in a painting is to some degree adaptable to the painter's purpose. This is not the case with photography. (Unless we include those absurd studio works in which the photographer arranges every detail of his subject before he takes the picture.) Composition in the profound, formative sense of the word cannot enter into photography.

The formal arrangement of a photograph explains nothing. The events portrayed are in themselves mysterious or explicable according to the spectator's knowledge of them prior to his seeing the photograph. What then gives the photograph as photograph meaning? What makes its minimal message – *I have decided that seeing this is worth recording* – large and vibrant?

The true content of a photograph is invisible, for it derives from a play, not with form, but with time. One might argue that photography is as close to music as to painting. I have said that a photograph bears witness to a human choice being exercised. This choice is not between photographing X and Y: but between photographing at X moment or at Y moment. The objects recorded in any photograph (from the most effective to the most commonplace) carry approximately the same weight, the same conviction. What varies is the intensity with which we are made aware of the poles of absence and presence. Between these two poles photography

finds its proper meaning. (The most popular use of the photograph is as a memento of the absent.)

A photograph, while recording what has been seen, always and by its nature refers to what is not seen. It isolates, preserves and presents a moment taken from a continuum. The power of a painting depends upon its internal references. Its reference to the natural world beyond the limits of the painted surface is never direct; it deals in equivalents. Or, to put it another way: painting interprets the world, translating it into its own language. But photography has no language of its own. One learns to read photographs as one learns to read footprints or cardiograms. The language in which photography deals is the language of events. All its referen external to itself. Hence the continuum.

A movie director can manipulate time as a pai an ma late the confluence of the events he depicts. N still nographer. The only decision he can take is as re mon he chooses to isolate. Yet this apparent limitatio pho graph its unique power. *What it shows invokes show* One can look at any photograph to appreciate f thi The immediate relation between what is present a bsen is particular to each photograph: it may be that , of grief to a tragedy, of a smile to a pleasure, of a bo of a winning race-horse to the race i n.

A photograph is effective wh hosen mo records contains a quantum of c is gene which is as revealing about wha on the about what is present in it. The n and the ways in which it can be dis found in an expression, an action, a ity, a configuration. Nor can this truth spectator. For the man with a Polyfoto quantum of truth in an 'impersonal' pi upon the general categories already in

All this may seem close to the old principle of art transforming the particular into the universal. But photography does not deal in constructs. There is no transforming in photography. There is only decision, only focus. The minimal message of a photograph may be less simple than we first thought. Instead of it being: *I have decided that seeing this is worth recording*, we may now decode it as: *The degree to which I believe this is worth looking at can be judged by all that I am willingly not showing because it is contained within it.*

Why complicate in this way an experience which we have many times every day – the experience of looking at a photograph? Because the simplicity with which we usually treat the experience is wasteful and confusing. We think of photographs as works of art, as evidence of a particular truth, as likenesses, as news items. Every photograp fact a means of testing, confirming and construct- ing a total reality. Hence the crucial role of photography in ideolog le. Hence the necessity of our understanding a weapon can use and which can be used against us.

October 1968

Political Uses of Photo-Montage

John Heartfield, whose real name was Helmut Herzfelde, was born in Berlin in 1891. His father was an unsuccessful poet and anarchist. Threatened with prison for public sacrilege, the father fled from Germany and settled in Austria. Both parents died when Helmut was eight. He was brought up by the peasant mayor of the village on the outskirts of which the Herzfelde family had been living in a forest hut. He had no more than a primary education.

As a youth he got a job in a relative's bookshop and from there worked his way to art school in Munich, where he quickly came to the conclusion that the fine arts were an anachronism. He adopted the English name Heartfield in defiance of German wartime patriotism. In 1916 he started with his brother Wieland a dissenting left-wing magazine, and, with George Grosz, invented the technique of photo-montage. (Raoul Hausmann claims to have invented it elsewhere at the same time.) In 1918 Heartfield became a founder member of the German Communist Party. In 1920 he played a leading role in the Berlin Dada Fair. Until 1924 he worked in films and for the theatre. Thereafter he worked as a graphic propagandist for the German communist press and between about 1927 and 1937 became internationally famous for the wit and force of his photo-montage posters and cartoons.

He remained a communist, living after the war in East Berlin, until his death in 1968. During the second half of his life, none of his published work was in any way comparable in originality or

didness is not a confirmation of the abstract moral belief that all power corrupts. It is a specific historical and political phenomenon. It could not occur in a theocracy or a secure feudal society. It must await the principle of modern democracy and then the cynical manipulating of that principle. It is endemic in, but by no means exclusive to, latter-day bourgeois politics and advanced capitalism. It is nurtured from the gulf between the aims a politician claims and the actions he has in fact already decided upon.

It is not born of personal deception or hypocrisy as such. Rather, it is born of the manipulator's assurance, of his own indifference to the flagrant contradiction which he himself displays between words and actions, between noble sentiments and routine practice. It resides in his complacent trust in the hidden undemocratic power of the state. Before each public appearance he knows that his words are only for those whom they can persuade, and that with those whom they do not there are other ways of dealing. Note this sordidness when watching the next party political broadcast.

What is the particular quality of Heartfield's best work? It stems from the originality and aptness of his use of photo-montage. In Heartfield's hands the technique becomes a subtle but vivid means of political education, and more precisely of Marxist education.

With his scissors he cuts out events and objects from the scenes to which they originally belonged. He then arranges them in a new, unexpected, discontinuous scene to make a political point – for example, parliament is being placed in a wooden coffin. But this much might be achieved by a drawing or even a verbal slogan. The peculiar advantage of photo-montage lies in the fact that everything which has been cut out keeps its familiar photographic appearance. We are still looking first at *things* and only afterwards at symbols.

But because these things have been shifted, because the natural continuities within which they normally exist have been broken, and because they have now been arranged to transmit an

passion to the best of his work done in the decade 1927–3
latter offers a rare example outside the Soviet Union d
revolutionary years of an artist committing his imaginat
to the service of a mass political struggle.

What are the qualities of this work? What conclus
draw from them? First, a general quality.

There is a Heartfield cartoon of Streicher standing
beside the inert body of a beaten-up Jew. The capti
German'. Streicher stands in his Nazi uniform,
back, eyes looking straight ahead, with an expre
denies nor affirms what has happened at his fe
metaphorically beneath his notice. On his ja
traces of dirt or blood. They are scarcely e
him – in different circumstances they would
that they do is slightly to soil his tunic.

In Hear
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on the one hand and the German social democrats on the
was both confused and arbitrary. In 1928, after the fall of
arin and under Stalin's pressure, the Comintern decided to
nate all social democrats as 'social fascists' – there is a Heart-
cartoon of 1931 in which he shows an SPD leader with the
of a snarling tiger. As a result of this arbitrary scheme of
plified moral clairvoyance being imposed from Moscow on
l contradictory facts, any chance of the German communists
uencing or collaborating with the nine million SPD voters who
re mostly workers and potential anti-Nazis was forfeited. It is
sible that with a different strategy the German working class
ght have prevented the rise of Hitler.

Heartfield accepted the party line, apparently without any mis-
ings. But among his works there is a clear distinction between
se which demystify and those which exhort with simplified
oral rhetoric. Those which demystify treat of the rise of Nazism
Germany – a social-historical phenomenon with which Heart-
eld was tragically and intimately familiar; those which exhort are
oncerned with global generalizations which he inherited ready-
ade from elsewhere.

Again, two examples. A cartoon of 1935 shows a minuscule Goeb-
els standing on a copy of *Mein Kampf*, putting out his hand in a
esture of dismissal. 'Away with these degenerate subhumans,' he
ays – a quotation from a speech he made at Nuremberg. Tower-
ng above him as giants, making his gesture pathetically absurd, is
a line of impassive Red Army soldiers with rifles at the ready. The
effect of such a cartoon on all but loyal communists could only
have been to confirm the Nazi lie that the USSR represented a
threat to Germany. In ideological contrasts, as distinct from real-
ity, there is only a paper-thin division between thesis and antith-
esis; a single reflex can turn black into white.

A poster for the First of May 1937 celebrating the Popular Front
in France. An arm holding a red flag and sprigs of cherry blossom;

a vague background of clouds (?), sea waves (?), mountains (?). A caption from the *Marseillaise*: 'Liberté, liberté chérie, combats avec tes défenseurs!' Everything about this poster is as symbolic as it is soon to be demonstrated politically false.

I doubt whether we are in a position to make moral judgements about Heartfield's integrity. We would need to know and to feel the pressures, both from within and without, under which he worked during that decade of increasing menace and terrible betrayals. But, thanks to his example, and that of other artists such as Mayakovsky or Tatlin, there is one issue which we should be able to see more clearly than was possible earlier.

It concerns the principal type of moral leverage applied to committed artists and propagandists in order to persuade them to suppress or distort their own original imaginative impulses. I am not speaking now of intimidation but of moral and political argument. Often such arguments were advanced by the artist himself against his own imagination.

The moral leverage was gained through asking questions concerning utility and effectiveness. Am I being useful enough? Is my work effective enough? These questions were closely connected with the belief that a work of art or a work of propaganda (the distinction is of little importance here) was a weapon of political struggle. Works of imagination can exert great political and social influence. Potentially revolutionary artists hope to integrate their [illegible] struggle. But the influence of their work cannot [illegible] by the artist or by a political commissar, in [illegible] that [illegible] a work [illegible] and far [illegible]

[illegible] of a weapon can be estimated quantitatively [illegible] weapon [illegible] of a work of imagination can[illegible] is incalculable or

repeatable. It changes with circumstances. It creates its own situation. There is no *foreseeable* quantitative correlation between the quality of a work of imagination and its effectiveness. And this is part of its nature because it is intended to operate within a field of subjective interactions which are interminable and immeasurable. This is not to grant to art an ineffable value; it is only to emphasize that the imagination, when true to its impulse, is continually and inevitably questioning the existing category of usefulness. It is ahead of that part of the social self which asks the question. It must deny itself in order to answer the question in its own terms. By way of this denial revolutionary artists have been persuaded to compromise, and to do so in vain – as I have indicated in the case of John Heartfield.

It is lies that can be qualified as useful or useless; the lie is surrounded by what has not been said and its usefulness or not can be gauged according to what has been hidden. The truth is always first discovered in open space.

October 1969

Photographs of Agony

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

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

There are no pictures from Vietnam in the papers toda there is a photograph taken by Donald McCullin in Hue i which could have been printed with the reports this morn

9 See Donald McCullin, *The Destruction Business* (London: C 1972).

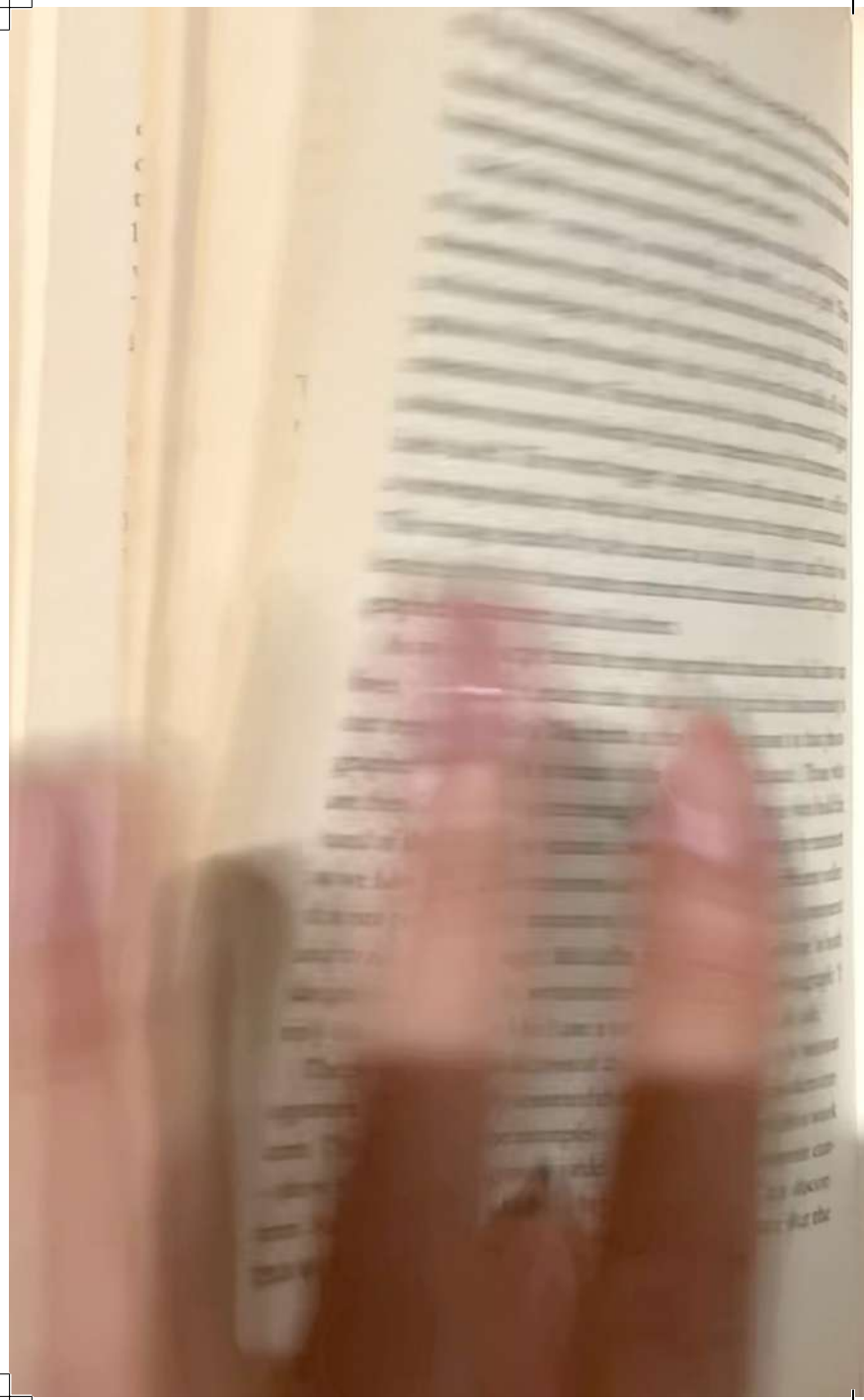
shows an old man squatting with a child in his arms; both of them are bleeding profusely with the black blood of black-and-white photographs.

In the last year or so, it has become normal for certain mass-circulation newspapers to publish war photographs which earlier would have been suppressed as being too shocking. One might explain this development by arguing that these newspapers have come to realize that a large section of their readers are now aware of the horrors of war and want to be shown the truth. Alternatively, one might argue that these newspapers believe that their readers have become inured to violent images and so now compete in terms of ever more violent sensationalism.

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

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

They bring us up short. The most literal adjective that could be applied to them is *arresting*. We are seized by them. (I am aware that there are people who pass them over, but about them there is nothing to say.) As we look at them, the moment of the other's suffering engulfs us. We are filled with either despair or indignation. Despair takes on some of the other's suffering to no purpose.



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

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

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

July 1972

The Suit and the Photograph

What did August Sander (1876–1964) tell his sitters before he took their pictures? And how did he say it so that they all believed him in the same way?

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

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

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

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

the village where I live, the men of
earing them. Of course there have
m: the width of trousers and lapels,
e. Yet the physical character of the suit
hange.

physical character. Or, more precisely,
hen worn by village peasants. And to make
nvincing, let us look at a second photograph
p. 38).

group portrait in 1913, yet it could well have
dance for which the three with their walking
out along the road. Now make an experiment.
of the band with a piece of paper, and consider
d bodies.

ch of the imagination can you believe that these
to the middle or ruling class. They might belong to
er than peasants; but otherwise there is no doubt. Nor
their hands – as it would be if you could touch them.
is their class so apparent?

uestion of fashion and the quality of the cloth of their
eal life such details would be telling. In a small black-and-
hotograph they are not very evident. Yet the static photo-
hows, perhaps more vividly than in life, the fundamental
why the suits, far from disguising the social class of those
wore them, underlined and emphasized it.

Their suits deform them. Wearing them, they look as though
y were physically misshapen. A past style in clothes often looks
bsurd until it is reincorporated into fashion. Indeed the economic
ogic of fashion depends on making the old-fashioned look absurd.
But here we are not faced primarily with that kind of absurdity;
here the clothes look less absurd, less 'abnormal' than the men's
bodies which are in them.

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

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

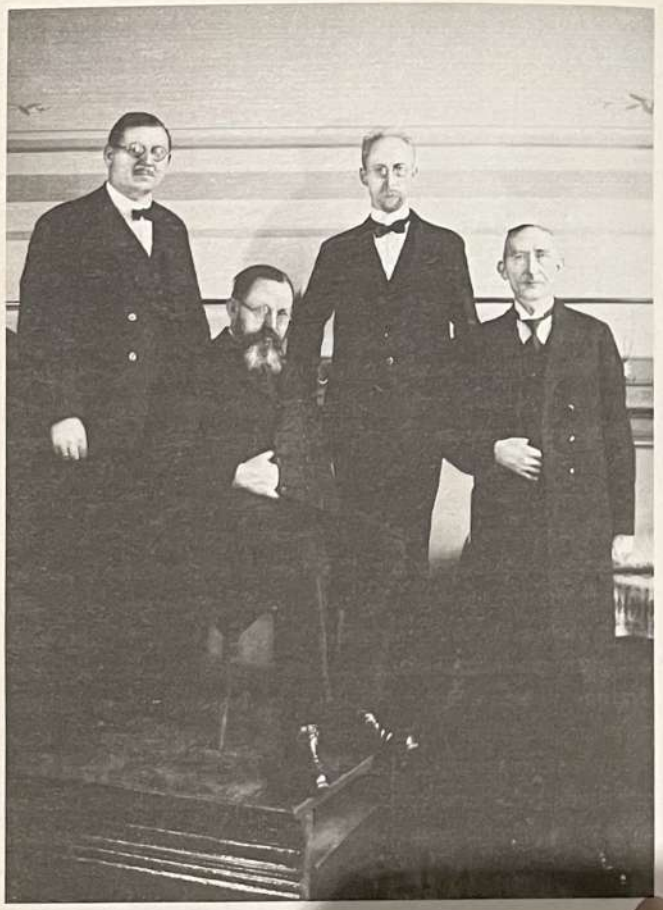
To make the point clearer, let us now consider an image where tailored clothes, instead of deforming, *preserve* the physical identity and therefore the natural authority of those wearing them. I have deliberately chosen a Sander photograph which looks old-fashioned and could easily lend itself to parody: the photograph of four Protestant missionaries in 1931 (see p. 40).

Despite the portentousness, it is not even necessary to make the experiment of blocking out the faces. It is clear that here the suits actually confirm and enhance the physical presence of those wearing them. The clothes convey the same message as the faces and as the history of the bodies they hide. Suits, experience, social formation and function coincide.

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

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

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



This rhythm is directly related to the energy dem y
amount of work which has to be done in a day, an
typical physical movements and stance. It is an ext

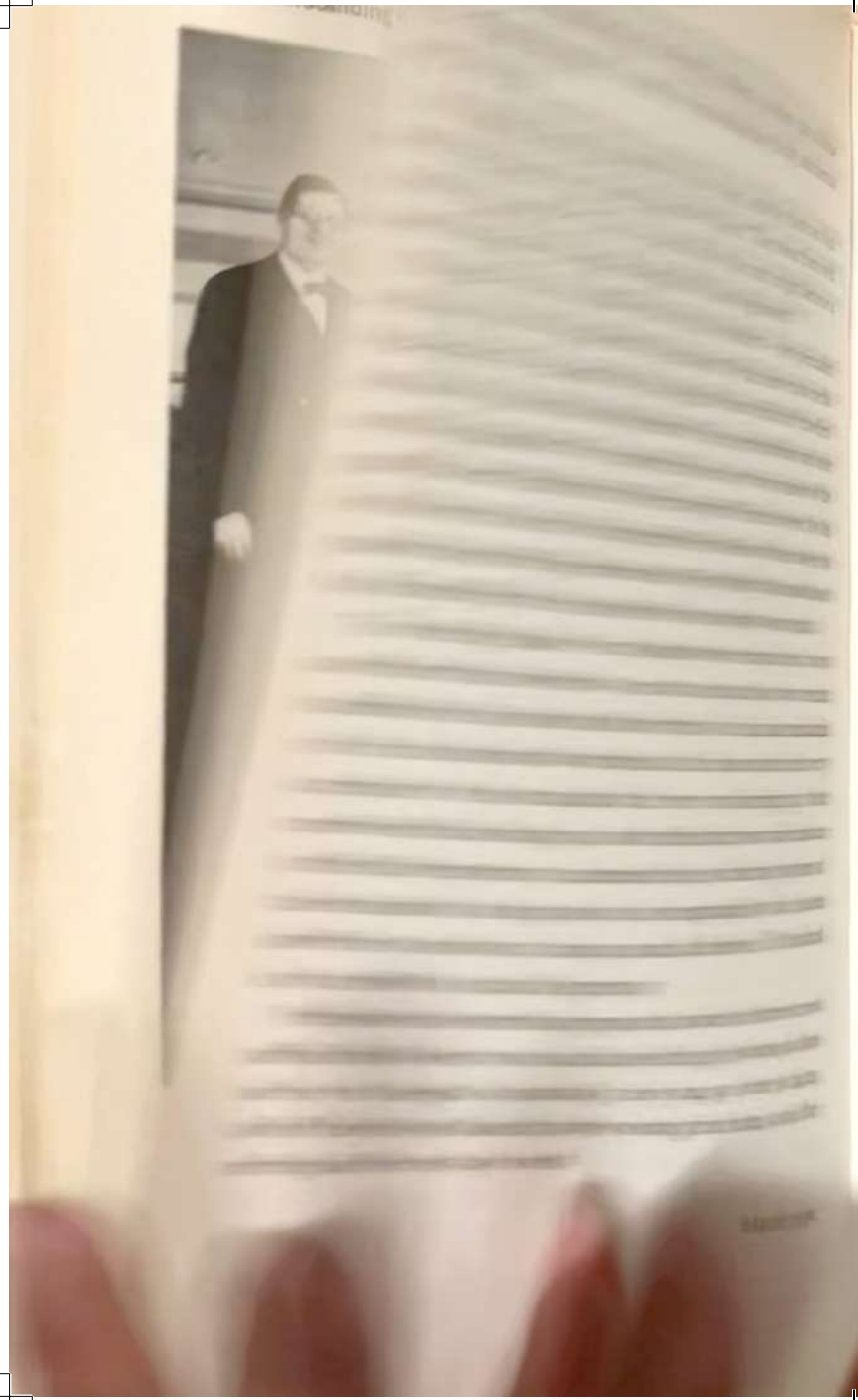
rhythm. Not necessarily slow. The traditional acts of scything or sawing may exemplify it. The way peasants ride horses makes it distinctive, as also the way they walk, as if testing the earth with each stride. In addition peasants possess a special physical dignity: this is determined by a kind of functionalism, a way of being *fully at home in effort*.

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

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

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

We can note, however, how traditional peasant working or ceremonial clothes respected the specific character of the bodies they were clothing. They were in general loose, and only tight in places where they were gathered to allow for freer movement.



Paul Strand

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

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

The earliest works deal mostly with people and sites in New York. The first of them shows a half-blind beggar woman. One of her eyes is opaque, the other sharp and wary. Round her neck she wears a label with BLIND printed on it. It is an image with a clear social message. But it is something else, too. We shall see later that in all Strand's best photographs of people, he presents us with the visible evidence, not just of their presence, but of their *life*. At one level, such evidence of a life is social comment – Strand has consistently taken a left political position – but, at a different level, such evidence serves to suggest visually the totality of another lived life, from within which we ourselves are no more than a sight. This is why the black letters B-L-I-N-D on a white label do more than spell the word. While the picture remains in front of us, we can

never take them as read. The earliest image in the book forces us to reflect on the significance of seeing itself.

The next section of photographs, from the 1920s, includes photographs of machine parts and close-ups of various natural forms – roots, rocks and grasses. Already Strand's technical perfectionism and strong aesthetic interests are apparent. But equally his obstinate, resolute respect for the thing-in-itself is also apparent. And the result is often disconcerting. Some would say that these photographs fail, for they remain details of what they have been taken from: they never become independent images. Nature, in these photographs, is intransigent to art, and the machine-details mock the stillness of their perfectly rendered images.

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

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

He has an infallible eye for the quintessential: whether it is to be

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

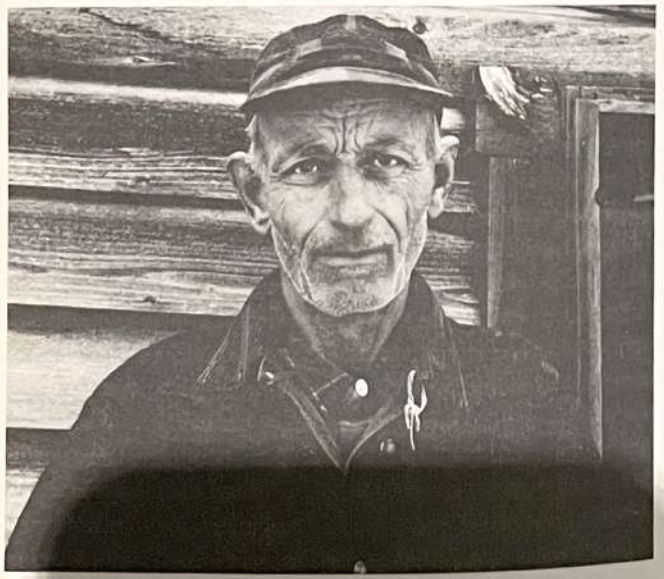
His method as a photographer is more unusual. One could say that it was the antithesis to Henri Cartier-Bresson's. The photographic moment for Cartier-Bresson is an instant, a fraction of a second, and he stalks that instant as though it were a wild animal. The photographic moment for Strand is a biographical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

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

Where he has chosen to place it is not where something is about to happen, but where a number of happenings will be related. Thus, without any use of anecdote, he turns his subjects into narrators. The river narrates itself. The field where the horses are grazing recounts itself. The wife tells the story of her marriage. In each case Strand, the photographer, has chosen the place to put his camera as listener.

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

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



A Mexican woman sits against a wall. She has a woollen shawl over her head and shoulders and a broken plaited basket on her lap. Her skirt is patched and the wall behind her very shabby. The

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

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

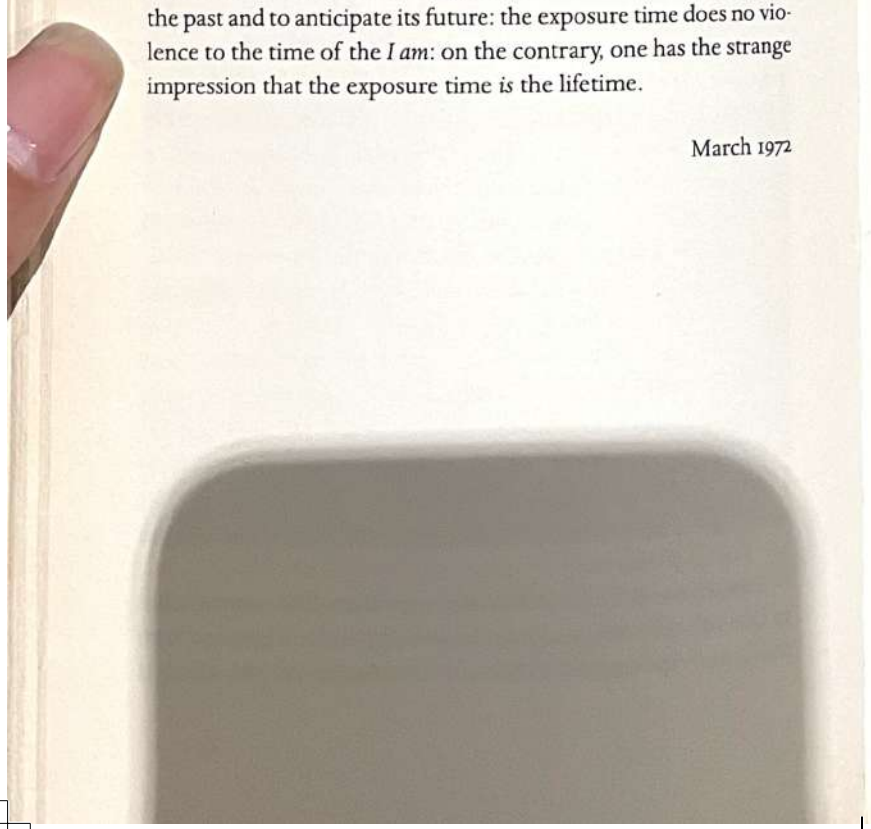
These photographs depend upon Strand's technical skill, his ability to select, his knowledge of the places he visits, his eye, his sense of timing, his use of the camera; but he might have all these talents and still not be capable of producing such pictures. What has finally determined his success in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

This is more complicated than it may seem. The present tense of the verb *to be* refers only to the present; but nevertheless, with the first-person singular in front of it, it absorbs the past which is

inseparable from the pronoun. *I am* includes all that has made me so. It is more than a statement of immediate fact: it is already an explanation, a justification, a demand – it is already autobiographical. Strand's photographs suggest his sitters trust him to *see* their life story. And it is for this reason that, although the portraits are formal and posed, there is no need, either on the part of photographer or photograph, for the disguise of a borrowed role.

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

March 1972



Uses of Photography

For Susan Sontag

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

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

It was not, however, until the twentieth century and the period between the two world wars that the photograph became the dominant and most 'natural' way of referring to appearances. It was then that it replaced the word as immediate testimony. It was the period when photography was thought of as being most transparent,

offering direct access to the real; the period of the great witnessing masters of the medium like Paul Strand and Walker Evans. It was, in the capitalist countries, the freest moment of photography: it had been liberated from the limitations of fine art, and it had become a public medium which could be used democratically.

Yet the moment was brief. The very 'truthfulness' of the new medium encouraged its deliberate use as a means of propaganda. The Nazis were among the first to use systematic photographic propaganda.

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

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

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

The first mass-media magazine was started in the United States in 1936. At least two things were prophetic about the launching of *Life*, the prophecies to be fully realized in the postwar television age. The new picture magazine was financed not by its sales, but by the advertising it carried. A third of its images were devoted to publicity. The second prophecy lay in its title. This is ambiguous. It may mean that the pictures inside are about life. Yet it seems to promise more: that these pictures *are* life. The first photograph in the first number played on this ambiguity. It showed a newborn baby. The caption underneath read: 'Life begins . . .'

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

> Proust somewhat misconstrues what photographs are: not so much an instrument of memory as an invention of it or a replacement.

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

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

Human visual perception is a far more complex and selective process than that by which a film records. Nevertheless the camera lens and the eye both register images – because of their sensitivity to light – at great speed and in the face of an immediate event. What the camera does, however, and what the eye in itself can never do,

is to *fix* the appearance of that event. It removes its appearance from the flow of appearances and it preserves it, not perhaps for ever but for as long as the film exists. The essential character of this preservation is not dependent upon the image being static; unedited film rushes preserve in essentially the same way. The camera saves a set of appearances from the otherwise inevitable supersession of further appearances. It holds them unchanging. And before the invention of the camera nothing could do this, except, in the mind's eye, the faculty of memory.

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

Yet, unlike memory, photographs do not in themselves preserve meaning. They offer appearances – with all the credibility and gravity we normally lend to appearances – prised away from their meaning. Meaning is the result of understanding functions.

> And functioning takes place in time, and must be explained in time. Only that which narrates can make us understand.

Photographs in themselves do not narrate. Photographs preserve instant appearances. Habit now protects us against the shock involved in such preservation. Compare the exposure time for a film with the life of the print made, and let us assume that the print only lasts ten years: the ratio for an average modern photograph would be approximately 20,000,000,000:1. Perhaps that can serve as a reminder of the violence of the fission whereby appearances are separated by the camera from their function.

We must now distinguish between two quite distinct uses of photography. There are photographs which belong to private experience and there are those which are used publicly. The private photograph – the portrait of a mother, a picture of a daughter, a

group photo of one's own team – is appreciated and read in a context which is continuous with that from which the camera removed it. (The violence of the removal is sometimes felt as incredulousness: 'Was that really Dad?') Nevertheless such a photograph remains surrounded by the meaning from which it was severed. A mechanical device, the camera has been used as an instrument to contribute to a living memory. The photograph is a memento from a life being lived.

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

Who is the stranger? One might answer: the photographer. Yet if one considers the entire use-system of photographed images, the answer of 'the photographer' is clearly inadequate. Nor can one reply: those who use the photographs. It is because the photographs carry no certain meaning in themselves, because they are like images in the memory of a total stranger, that they lend themselves to any use.

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

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

The faculty of memory led men everywhere to ask whether, just as they themselves could preserve certain events from oblivion, there

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

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

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

During the second half of the twentieth century the judgement of history has been abandoned by all except the underprivileged and dispossessed. The industrialized, 'developed' world, terrified of the past, blind to the future, lives within an opportunism which has emptied the principle of justice of all credibility. Such opportunism turns everything – nature, history, suffering, other people, catastrophes, sport, sex, politics – into spectacle. And the implement used to do this – until the act becomes so habitual that the conditioned imagination may do it alone – is the camera.

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

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

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

> A capitalist society requires a culture based on images. It needs to furnish vast amounts of entertainment in order to stimulate buying and anaesthetize the injuries of class, race, and sex. And it needs to gather unlimited amounts of information, the better to exploit the natural resources, increase productivity, keep order, make war, give jobs to bureaucrats. The camera's twin capacities, to subjectivize reality and to objectify it, ideally serve these needs and strengthen them. Cameras define reality in the two ways essential to the workings of an advanced industrial society: as a spectacle (for masses) and as an object of surveillance (for rulers). The production of images also furnishes a ruling ideology. Social change is replaced by a change in images.

Her theory of the current use of photographs leads one to ask whether photography might serve a different function. Is there an alternative photographic practice? The question should not

be answered naïvely. Today no alternative professional practice (if one thinks of the profession of photographer) is possible. The system can accommodate any photograph. Yet it may be possible to begin to use photographs according to a practice addressed to an alternative future. This future is a hope which we need now, if we are to maintain a struggle, a resistance, against the societies and culture of capitalism.

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

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

In the most famous photographic exhibition ever organized, *The Family of Man* (put together by Edward Steichen in 1955), photographs from all over the world were presented as though they formed a universal family album. Steichen's intuition was absolutely correct: the private use of photographs can be exemplary for their public use. Unfortunately the shortcut he took in treating the existing class-divided world as if it were a family inevitably made the whole exhibition, not necessarily each picture, sentimental and complacent. The truth is that most photographs taken of people are about suffering, and most of that suffering is man-made.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The alternative use of photographs which already exist leads us back once more to the phenomenon and faculty of memory.

The aim must be to construct a context for a photograph, to construct it with words, to construct it with other photographs, to construct it by its place in an ongoing text of photographs and images. How? Normally photographs are used in a very unilinear way – they are used to illustrate an argument, or to demonstrate a thought which goes like this:

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

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

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

> So you should simply make the instant
> Stand out, without in the process hiding
> What you are making it stand out from. Give your acting
> That progression of one-thing-after-another, that attitude of
> Working up what you have taken on. In this way
> You will show the flow of events and also the course
> Of your work, permitting the spectator

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

What makes photographs like these so tragic and … is that, looking at them, one is convinced that th… to please generals, to boost the morale of a … ify heroic soldiers or to shock the world … addressed to those suffering what they … ity towards and with their … became … fo…

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…guity of the Photograph

…tography a strange invention – with unforesee… …es – is that its primary raw materials are light and …

…gin with something more tangible. A few days ago …ne found this photograph and showed it to me.

…thing about it. The best way of dating it is probably …ographic technique. Between 1900 and 1920? I do not …ther it was taken in Canada, the Alps, South Africa. All …ce is that it shows a smiling middle-aged man with his …(see p. 62). Why was it taken? What meaning did it have for …tographer? Would it have had the same meaning for the …with the horse?

…e can play a game of inventing meanings. The Last Mountie. (His smile becomes nostalgic.) The Man Who Set Fire to Farms. (His smile becomes sinister.) Before the Trek of Two Thousand Miles. (His smile becomes a little apprehensive.) After the Trek of Two Thousand Miles. (His smile becomes modest.) . . .

The most definite information this photograph gives is about the type of bridle the horse is wearing, and this is certainly not the reason why it was taken. Looking at the photograph alone it is even hard to know to what category it belonged. Was it a family-album picture, a newspaper picture, a traveller's snap?

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the horse? W
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Between the moment recorded and the present moment of looking at the photograph, there is an abyss. We are so used to photography that we no longer consciously register the second of these twin messages – except in special circumstances: when, for example, the person photographed was familiar to us and is now far away or dead. In such circumstances the photograph is more traumatic than most memories or mementos because it seems to confirm, prophetically, the later discontinuity created by the absence or death. Imagine for a moment that you were once in love with the man with the horse and that he has now disappeared.

If, however, he is a total stranger, one thinks only of the first message, which here is so ambiguous that the event escapes one. What the photograph shows goes with any story one chooses to invent.

Nevertheless the mystery of this photograph does not quite end there. No invented story, no explanation offered will be quite as *present* as the banal appearances preserved in this photograph. These appearances may tell us very little, but they are unquestionable.

The first photographs were thought of as marvels because, far more directly than any other form of visual image, they presented the appearance of what was absent. They preserved the look of things and they allowed the look of things to be carried away. The marvel in this was not only technical.

Our response to appearances is a very deep one, and it includes elements which are instinctive and atavistic. For example, appearances alone – regardless of all conscious considerations – can sexually arouse. For example, the stimulus to action – however tentative it remains – can be provoked by the colour red. More widely, the look of the world is the widest possible confirmation of the *thereness* of the world, and thus the look of the world continually proposes and confirms our relation to that thereness, which nourishes our sense of Being.

Before you tried to read the photograph of the man with the horse, before you placed it or named it, the simple act of looking

at it confirmed, however briefly, your sense of being in the world with its men, hats, horses, bridles . . .

The ambiguity of a photograph does not reside within the instant of the event photographed: there the photographic evidence is less ambiguous than any eye-witness account. The photo-finish of a race is rightly decided by what the camera has recorded. The ambiguity arises out of that discontinuity which gives rise to the second of the photograph's twin messages. (The abyss between the moment recorded and the moment of looking.)

A photograph preserves a moment of time and prevents it being effaced by the supersession of further moments. In this respect photographs might be compared to images stored in the memory. Yet there is a fundamental difference: whereas remembered images are the *residue* of continuous experience, a photograph isolates the appearances of a disconnected instant.

And in life, meaning is not instantaneous. Meaning is discovered in what connects, and cannot exist without development. Without a story, without an unfolding, there is no meaning. Facts, information, do not in themselves constitute meaning. Facts can be fed into a computer and become factors in a calculation. No meaning, however, comes out of computers. [illegible] when we give meaning to an event, that meaning is a respo[illegible] only to the known, but also to the unknown: meanin[illegible]tery are inseparable, and neither can exist without th[illegible] instantaneous; doub[illegible] An instant photo[illegible] as the viewer can [illegible] itself. When we find a pho[illegible] past and a futur[illegible]

The profe[illegible] photograph, to choose an [illegible] to lend it an appropr[illegible] intelligence

or his empathy with the subject defines for him what is appropriate. Yet unlike the storyteller or painter or actor, the photographer only makes, in any one photograph, *a single constitutive choice*: the choice of the instant to be photographed. The photograph, compared with other means of communication, is therefore weak in intentionality.

A dramatic photograph may be as ambiguous as an undramatic one.

What is happening? It requires a caption for us to understand the significance of the event. 'Nazis Burning Books'. And the significance of the caption again depends upon a sense of history that we cannot necessarily take for granted.

All photographs are ambiguous. All photographs have been taken out of a continuity. If the event is a public event, this continuity is history; if it is personal, the continuity, which has been broken, is a life story. Even a pure landscape breaks a continuity: that of the light and the weather. Discontinuity always produces

ambiguity. Yet often this ambiguity is not obvious, for as soon as photographs are used with words, they produce together an effect of certainty, even of dogmatic assertion.

In the relation between a photograph and words, the photograph begs for an interpretation, and the words usually supply it. The photograph, irrefutable as evidence but weak in meaning, is given a meaning by the words. And the words, which by themselves remain at the level of generalization, are given specific authenticity by the irrefutability of the photograph. Together the two then become very powerful; an open question appears to have been fully answered.

Yet it might be that the photographic ambiguity, if recognized and accepted as such, could offer to photography a unique means of expression. Could this ambiguity suggest another way of telling? This is a question I want to raise now and return to later.

Cameras are boxes for transporting appearances. The principle by which cameras work has not changed since their invention. Light, from the object photographed, passes through a hole and falls on to a photographic plate or film. The latter, because of its chemical preparation, preserves these traces of light. From these traces, through other slightly more complicated chemical processes, prints are made. Technically, by the standards of our century, it is a simple process. Just as the historically comparable invention of the printing press was, in its time, simple. What is still not so simple is to grasp the nature of the appearances which the camera transports.

Are the appearances which a camera transports a construction, a man-made cultural artefact, or are they, like a footprint in the sand, a trace *naturally* left by something that has passed? The answer is, both.

The photographer chooses the event he photographs. This choice can be thought of as a cultural construction. The space for this construction is, as it were, cleared by his rejection of what

he did not choose to photograph. The construction is his reading of the event which is in front of his eyes. It is this reading, often intuitive and very fast, which decides his choice of the instant to be photographed.

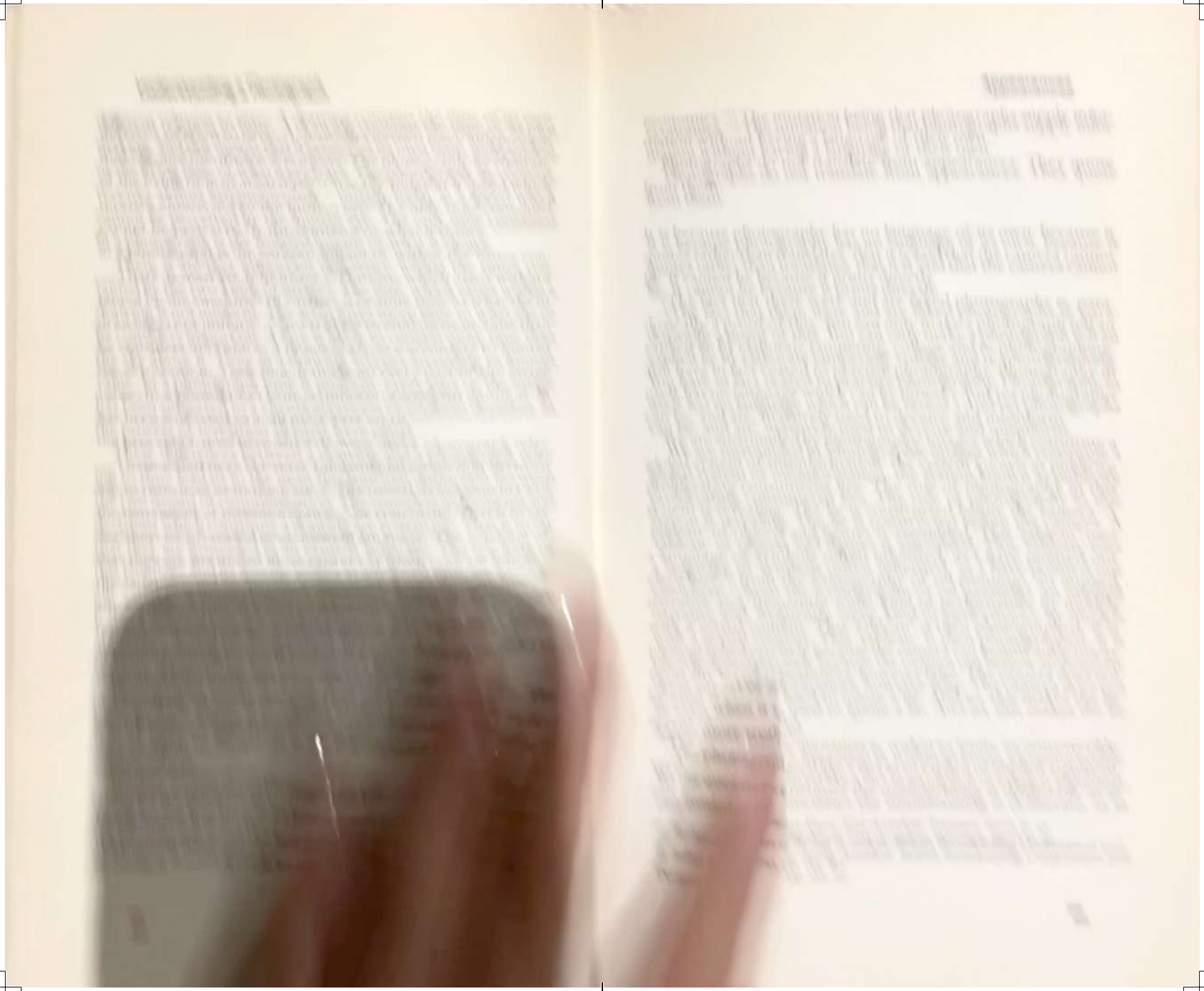
Likewise, the photographed image of the event, when shown as a photograph, is also part of a cultural construction. It belongs to a specific social situation, the life of the photographer, an argument, an experiment, a way of explaining the world, a book, a newspaper, an exhibition.

Yet at the same time, the material relation between the image and what it represents (between the marks on the printing paper and the tree these marks represent) is an immediate and unconstructed one. And is indeed like a *trace*.

The photographer chooses the tree, the view of it he wants, the kind of film, the focus, the filter, the time exposure, the strength of the developing solution, the sort of paper to print on, the darkness or lightness of the print, the framing of the print – all this and more. But where he does not intervene – and cannot intervene without changing the fundamental character of photography – is between the light, emanating from that tree as it passes through the lens, and the imprint it makes on the film.

It may clarify what we mean by a *trace* if we ask how a drawing differs from a photograph. A drawing is a translation. That is to say each mark on the paper is consciously related, not only to the real or imagined 'model', but also to every mark and space already set out on the paper. Thus a drawn or painted image is woven together by the energy (or the lassitude, when the drawing is weak) of countless judgements. Every time a figuration is evoked in a drawing, everything about it has been mediated by consciousness, either intuitively or systematically. In a drawing an apple is *made* round and spherical; in a photograph, the roundness and the light and shade of the apple are received as a given.

This difference between making and receiving also implies a very



the case of publicity; often it is the result of an unquestioned ideological assumption.

For example, all over the world during the nineteenth century, European travellers, soldiers, colonial administrators, adventurers, took photographs of 'the natives', their customs, their architecture, their richness, their poverty, their women's breasts, their headdresses; and these images, besides provoking amazement, were presented and read as proof of the justice of the imperial division of the world. The division between those who organized and rationalized and surveyed, and those who *were* surveyed.

In itself the photograph cannot lie, but, by the same token, it cannot tell the truth; or rather, the truth it does tell, the truth it can by itself defend, is a limited one.

The idealistic early press photographers – in the twenties and thirties of this century – believed that their mission was to bring home the truth to the world.

> Sometimes I come away from what I am photographing sick at heart, with the faces of people in pain etched as sharply in my mind as on my negatives. But I go back because I feel it is my place to make such pictures. Utter truth is essential, and that is what stirs me when I look through the camera.
>
> Margaret Bourke-White

I admire the work of Margaret Bourke-White. And photographers, under certain political circumstances, have indeed helped to alert public opinion to the truth of what was happening elsewhere. For example: the degree of rural poverty in the United States in the 1930s; the treatment of Jews in the streets of Nazi Germany; the effects of US napalm bombing in Vietnam. Yet to believe that what one sees, as one looks through a camera on to the experience of others, is the 'utter truth' risks confusing very different levels of

the truth. And this confusion is endemic to the present public use of photographs.

Photographs are used for scientific investigation: in medicine, physics, meteorology, astronomy, biology. Photographic information is also fed into systems of social and political control – dossiers, passports, military intelligence. Other photographs are used in the media as a means of public communication. The three contexts are different, and yet it has been generally assumed that the truthfulness of the photograph – or the way that this truth functions – is the same in all three.

In fact, when a photograph is used scientifically, its unquestionable evidence is an aid in coming to a conclusion: it supplies information *within the conceptual framework* of an investigation. It supplies a missing detail. When photographs are used in a control system, their evidence is more or less limited to establishing identity and presence. But as soon as a photograph is used as a means of communication, the nature of lived experience is involved, and then the truth becomes more complex.

An X-ray photograph of a wounded leg can tell the 'utter truth' about whether the bones are fractured or not. But how does a photograph tell the 'utter truth' about a man's experience of hunger or, for that matter, his experience of a feast?

At one level there are no photographs which can be denied. All photographs have the status of fact. What has to be examined is in what way photography can and cannot give meaning to facts.

Let us recall how and when photography was born, how, as it were, it was christened, and how it grew up.

The camera was invented in 1839. Auguste Comte was just finishing his *Cours de philosophie positive*. Positivism and the camera and sociology grew up together. What sustained them all as practices was the belief that observable quantifiable facts, recorded

by scientists and experts, would one day offer man such a total knowledge about nature and society that he would be able to order them both. Precision would replace metaphysics, planning would resolve social conflicts, truth would replace subjectivity, and all that was dark and hidden in the soul would be illuminated by empirical knowledge. Comte wrote that theoretically nothing need remain unknown to man except, perhaps, the origin of the stars! Since then cameras have photographed even the formation of stars! And photographers now supply us with more facts every month than the eighteenth-century Encylopedists dreamt of in their whole project.

Yet the positivist utopia was not achieved. And the world today is less controllable by experts, who have mastered what they believe to be its mechanisms, than it was in the nineteenth century.

What *was* achieved was unprecedented scientific and technical progress and, eventually, the subordination of all other values to those of a world market which treats everything, including people and their labour and their lives and their deaths, as a commodity. The unachieved positivist utopia became, instead, the global system of late capitalism wherein all that exists becomes quantifiable – not simply because it *can be* reduced to a statistical fact, but also because it *has been* reduced to a commodity.

In such a system there is no space for experience. Each person's experience remains an individual problem. Personal psychology replaces philosophy as an explanation of the world.

Nor is there space for the social function of subjectivity. All subjectivity is treated as private, and the only (false) form of it which is socially allowed is that of the individual consumer's dream.

From this primary suppression of the social function of subjectivity, other suppressions follow: of meaningful democracy (replaced by opinion polls and market-research techniques), of social conscience (replaced by self-interest), of history (replaced by racist and other myths), of hope – the most subjective and

social of all energies (replaced by the sacralization of Progress as Comfort).

The way photography is used today both derives from and confirms the suppression of the social function of subjectivity. Photographs, it is said, tell the truth. From this simplification, which reduces the truth to the instantaneous, it follows that what a photograph tells about a door or a volcano belongs to the same order of truth as what it tells about a man weeping or a woman's body.

If no theoretical distinction has been made between the photograph as scientific evidence and the photograph as a means of communication, *this has been not so much an oversight as a proposal.*

The proposal was (and is) that when something is visible, it is a fact, and that facts contain the only truth.

Public photography has remained the child of the hopes of positivism. Orphaned – because these hopes are now dead – it has been adopted by the opportunism of corporate capitalism. It seems likely that the denial of the innate ambiguity of the photograph is closely connected with the denial of the social function of subjectivity.

A Popular Use of Photography

> 'In our age there is no work of art that is looked at so closely as a photograph of oneself, one's closest relatives and friends, one's sweetheart,' wrote Lichtwark back in 1907, thereby moving the inquiry out of the realm of aesthetic distinctions into that of social functions. Only from this vantage point can it be carried further.
>
> Walter Benjamin, *A Small History of Photography* (1931)

A mother with her child is staring intently at a soldier. Perhaps they are speaking. We cannot hear their words. Perhaps they are saying

nothing and everything is being said by the way they are looking at each other. Certainly a drama is being enacted between them.

The caption reads: 'A Red Hussar Leaving, June 1919, Budapest.' The photograph is by André Kertész.

So, the woman has just walked out of their home and will shortly go back down with the child. The drama of the moment is expressed in the difference between the clothes they are wearing. His for travelling, for sleeping out, for fighting; hers for staying at home.

The caption can also entail other thoughts. The Hapsburg monarchy had fallen the previous autumn. The winter had been one of serious shortages (especially of fuel in Budapest) and economic disintegration. Three months before, in March, the Socialist Republic of Councils had been declared. The Western allies in Paris feared lest the Russian and now the Hungarian example of revolution should spread throughout Eastern Europe

and the Balkans, were planning to dismantle the new republic. A blockade was already imposed. General Foch himself was planning the military invasion being carried out by Rumanian and Czech troops. On 8 June Clemenceau telegraphed an ultimatum to Béla Kun demanding a Hungarian military withdrawal which would have left the Rumanians occupying the eastern third of their country. For another six weeks the Hungarian Red Army fought on, but it was finally overwhelmed. By August, Budapest was occupied and very soon after, the first European fascist regime under Horthy was established.

If we see looking at an image from the past and we want to relate it to ourselves, we need to know something of the history of that past. And so the foregoing paragraph – and much more than that might be said – is relevant to the reading of Kertész's photograph. Which is presumably why he gave it the caption he did and not just the title 'Parting'. Yet the photograph – or rather, the way this photograph demands to be read – cannot be limited to the historical.

Everything in it is historical: the uniforms, the rifles, the corner by the Budapest railway station, the identity and biographies of all the people who are (or were) recognizable – even the size of the trees on the other side of the fence. And yet it also concerns a resistance to history: an opposition.

This opposition is not the consequence of the photographer having said: Stop! It is not that the resultant static image is like a fixed point in a flowing river. We know that in a moment the soldier will turn his back and leave; we presume that he is the father of the child in the woman's arms. The significance of the instant photographed is already claiming minutes, weeks, years.

The opposition exists in the parting look between the man and the woman. This look is not directed towards the viewer. We witness it as the older soldier with the moustache and the woman with the shawl (perhaps a sister) do. The exclusivity of this look is

nothing and everything is being said by the way they are looking at each other. Certainly a drama is being enacted between them.

The caption reads: *A Red Hussar Leaving, June 1919, Budapest.* The photograph is by André Kertész.

So, the woman has just walked out of their home and shortly go back alone with the child. The drama of the is expressed in the difference between the clothes they ing. His for travelling, for sleeping out, for fighting; h ing at home.

The caption can also entail other th monarchy had fall one of extrem economic socialis allies exa

e handling, and what they are thinking, are probably d and thought by them for the last time. As they build the pain increases.

e barricades the pain is over. The transformation is completed by a shout from the rooftops that the soldiers cing. Suddenly there is nothing to regret. The barricades en their defenders and the violence done to them through lives. There is nothing to regret because it is the quintes their past which is now advancing against them. On their the barricades it is already the future.[12]

itionary actions are rare. Feelings of opposition to history, er, are constant, even if unarticulated. They often find their ssion in what is called private life. A home has become not physical shelter but also a teleological shelter, however frail, st the remorselessness of history; a remorselessness which ild be distinguished from the brutality, injustice and misery same history often contains.

People's opposition to history is a reaction (even a protest, but protest so intimate that it has no direct social expression and the direct ones are often mystified and dangerous: both fascism and acism feed upon such protests) against a violence done to them. The violence consists in conflating time and history so that the wo become indivisible, so that people can no longer read their experience of either of them separately.

This conflation began in Europe in the nineteenth century, and has become more complete and more extensive as the rate of historical change has increased and become global. All popular religious movements – such as the present mounting Islamic one against the materialism of the West – are a form of resistance to the violence of this conflation.

12 John Berger, G. (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1972), pp. 71–2.

What does this violence consist in? The human imagination which grasps and unifies time (before imagination existed, each time scale – cosmic, geological, biological – was disparate) has always had the capacity of undoing time. This capacity is closely connected with the faculty of memory. Yet time is undone not only by being remembered but also by the living of certain moments which defy the passing of time, not so much by becoming unforgettable but because, within the experience of such moments there is an imperviousness to time. They are experiences which provoke the words *for ever*, *toujours*, *sempre*, *immer*. Moments of achievement, trance, dream, passion, crucial ethical decision, prowess, near-death, sacrifice, mourning, music, the visitation of *duende*. To name some of them.

Such moments have continually occurred in human experience. Although not frequent in any one lifetime, they are common. They are the material of all lyrical expression (from pop music to Sappho). Nobody has lived without experiencing such moments. Where people differ is in the confidence with which they credit importance to them. I say confidence since I believe that intimately, if not publicly, no one fails to allow them some importance. They are summit moments and they are intrinsic to the relativeness of human time.

has passed through. (A study of the comparative number of public monuments erected during the last hundred years in the West would show a startling decline during the last twenty-five.) There is no longer any generally acknowledged value longer than that of a life, and most are shorter. The worldwide phenomenon of inflation is symptomatic in this respect: an unprecedented modern form of economic transience.

Consequently the common experience of those moments which defy time is now denied by everything which surrounds them. Such moments have ceased to be like windows looking across history towards the timeless. Experiences which prompt the term *for ever* have now to be assumed alone and privately. Their role has been changed: instead of transcending, they isolate. The period in which photography has developed corresponds to the period in which this uniquely modern anguish has become commonplace.

Yet fortunately people are never only the passive objects of history. And apart from popular heroism, there is also popular ingenuity. In this case such ingenuity uses whatever little there is at hand, to preserve experience, to recreate an area of 'timelessness', to insist upon the permanent. And so, hundreds of millions of photographs, fragile images, often carried next to the heart or placed by the side of the bed, are used to refer to that which historical time has no right to destroy.

The private photograph is treated and valued today as if it were the materialization of that glimpse through the window which looked across history towards that which was outside time.

The photograph of the woman and the Red Hussar represents an idea. The idea was not Kertész's. It was being lived in front of his eyes and he was receptive to it.

What did he see?

Summer sunlight.

The contrast between her dress and the heavy greatcoats of the soldiers who will have to sleep out.

The men waiting with a certain heaviness.

Her concentration – she looks at him as if already into the distance which will claim him.

Her scowl, which will not give way to weeping.

His modesty – one reads it by his ear and the way he holds his head because at this moment she is stronger than he.

Her acceptance, in the stance of her body.

The boy, surprised by the father's uniform, aware of the unusual occasion.

Her hair arranged before coming out, her worn dress.

The limits of their wardrobe.

It is only possible to itemize the things seen, for if they touch the heart, they do so essentially through the eye. For example, the appearance of the woman's hands clasped over her stomach tells how she might peel potatoes, how one of her hands might lie when asleep, how she would put up her hair.

The woman and the soldier are recognizing one another. How close a parting is to a meeting! And through that act of recognition, such as perhaps they have never experienced before, each hopes to take away an image of the other which will withstand anything that may happen. An image that nothing can efface. This is the idea being lived before Kertész's camera. And this is what makes this photograph paradigmatic. It shows a moment which is explicitly about what is implicit in all photographs that are not simply enjoyed but loved.

All photographs are possible contributions to history, and any photograph, under certain circumstances, can be used in order to break the monopoly which history today has over time.

The Enigma of Appearances

To read what has never been written.

Hofmannsthal

We have looked at two different uses of photography. An ideological use, which treats the positivist evidence of a photograph as if it represented the ultimate and only truth. And in contrast, a popular but private use, which cherishes a photograph to substantiate a subjective feeling.

I have not considered photography as an art. Paul Strand, who was a great photographer, thought of himself as an artist. In recent years art museums have begun to collect and show photographs. Man Ray said: 'I photograph what I do not wish to paint, and I paint what I cannot photograph.' Other equally serious photographers, like Bruce Davidson, claim it as a virtue that their pictures do not 'pose as art'.

The arguments, put forward from the nineteenth century onwards, about photography sometimes being an art have confused rather than clarified the issue because they have always led to some kind of comparison with the art of painting. And an art of translation cannot usefully be compared to an art of quotation. Their resemblances, their influence one upon the other, are purely formal; functionally they have nothing in common.

Yet however true this may be, a crucial question remains: why can photographs of unknown subjects move us? If photographs do not function like paintings, how do they function? I have argued that photographs quote from appearances. This may suggest that appearances themselves constitute a language.

What sense does it make to say this?

Let me first try to avoid a possible misunderstanding. In his last book Barthes wrote: 'Each time when I [illegible] way

with a language, I have felt that its system consists in, and in that way is slipping towards, a kind of reductionism and disapproval, I have quietly left and looked elsewhere.'

Unlike their late master, some of Barthes' structuralist followers love closed systems. They would maintain that in my reading of Kertész's photograph, I relied upon a number of semiological systems, each one being a social/cultural construct: the sign language of clothes, of facial expressions, of bodily gestures, of social manners, of photographic framing, etc. Such semiological systems do indeed exist and are continually being used in the making and reading of images. Nevertheless the sum total of these systems cannot exhaust, does not begin to cover, all that can be read in appearances. Barthes himself was of this opinion. The problem of appearances constituting something like a language cannot be resolved simply by reference to these semiological systems.

So we are left with the question: what sense does it make to say that appearances may constitute a language?

Appearances cohere. At the first degree they cohere because of common laws of structure and growth which establish visual affinities. A chip of rock can resemble a mountain; grass grows like hair; waves have the form of valleys; snow is crystalline; the growth of walnuts is constrained in their shells somewhat like the growth of brains in their skulls; all supporting legs and feet, whether static or mobile, visually refer to one another; etc., etc.

At the second degree, appearances cohere because as soon as a fairly developed eye exists, visual imitation begins. All natural camouflage, much natural colouring and a wide range of animal behaviour derive from the principle of appearances fusing or being suggestive of other appearances. On the underside of the wings of the Brassolinae, there are markings which imitate, with great accuracy, the eyes of an owl or another large bird. When attacked, these butterflies flick their wings and their attackers are intimidated by the flashing eyes.

Appearances both distinguish *and* join events.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, when the coherence of appearances had been largely forgotten, one man understood and insisted upon the significance of such a coherence.

> Objects interpenetrate each other. They never cease to live. Imperceptibly they spread intimate reflections around them.
>
> Cézanne

Appearances also cohere within the mind as perceptions. The sight of any single thing or event entrains the sight of other things and events. To recognize an appearance requires the memory of other appearances. And these memories, often projected as expectations, continue to qualify the seen long after the stage of primary recognition. Here for example, we recognize a baby at the breast, but neither our visual memory nor our visual expectations stop there. One image interpenetrates another.

As soon as we say that appearances *cohere* this *coherence* proposes a unity not unlike that of a language.

Seeing and organic life are both dependent upon light, and appearances are the face of this mutuality. And so appearances can be said to be doubly systematic. They belong to a natural affiniti system which exists as such because of certain universal structu and dynamic laws. This is why, as already noted, all le one another. Secondly, they belong to a perceptive organizes the mind's experience of the visible.

The primary energy of the first system is natur always thrusting towards the future; the prima second system is memory, continually retainin perceived appearances there is the doub traffi

We now know that it is the right he re which 'reads' and stores our visual

because the areas and centres where this takes place are structurally identical with those in the left hemisphere which process our experience of words. The apparatus with which we deal with appearances is identical with that with which we deal with verbal language. Furthermore, appearances in their unmediated state – that is to say, before they have been interpreted or perceived – lend themselves to reference systems (so that they may be stored at a certain level in the memory) which are comparable to those used for words. And this again prompts one to conclude that appearances possess some of the qualities of a code.

All cultures previous to our own treated appearances as signs addressed to the living. All was *legend*: all was there to be *read* by the eye. Appearances revealed resemblances, analogies, sympathies, antipathies, and each of these conveyed a message. The sum total of these messages explained the universe.

The Cartesian revolution overthrew the basis for any such explanation. It was no longer the relation between the look of things which mattered. What mattered was measurement and difference, rather than visual correspondences. The purely physical could no longer in itself reveal meaning; it could do so only if investigated by reason, which was the probe of the spiritual. Appearances ceased to be double-faced like the words of a dialogue. They became dense and opaque, requiring dissection.

Modern science became possible. The visible, however, deprived of any ontological function, was philosophically reduced to the area of aesthetics. Aesthetics was the study of sensuous perceptions as they affected an individual's feelings. Thus, the reading of appearances became fragmented; they were no longer treated as a signifying whole. Appearances were reduced to contingency, whose meaning was r personal.

The developme elp to explain the fitfulness and erratic history of nine ury and twentieth-century visual art. For the first ti al art was severed from the belief that

it was in the very nature of appearances to be meaningful.

If, however, I persist in maintaining that appearances resemble a language, considerable difficulties arise. Where, for example, are its *universals*? A language of appearance implies an encoder; if appearances are there to be read, who wrote them?

It was a rationalist illusion to believe that in dispensing with religion, mysteries would be reduced. What has happened, on the contrary, is that mysteries multiply. Merleau-Ponty wrote:

> We must take literally what vision teaches us, namely that through it we come in contact with the sun and the stars, that we are everywhere all at once, and that even our power to imagine ourselves elsewhere . . . borrows from vision and employs means we owe to it. Vision alone makes us learn that beings that are different, 'exterior', foreign to one another, are yet absolutely *together*, are 'simultaneity'; this is a mystery psychologists handle the way a child handles explosives.[13]

There is no need to disinter ancient religious and magical beliefs which held that the visible is *nothing except a coded message*. These beliefs, being ahistorical, ignored the coincidence of the historical development of eye *and* brain. They also ignored the coincidence that both seeing and organic life are dependent upon li
Yet the enigma of appearances remains, whatever our histo
explanations. Philosophically, we can evade the eni
cannot *look* away from it.

One looks at one's surroundings (and one is alwa
the visible, even in dreams) and one reads what
to circumstances, in different ways. Driving a
kind of reading; cutting down a tr nother;

13 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primac tion* (E
ern University Press, 1964), p. 187.

another. Each activity motivates its own reading.

At other times the reading, or the choices which make a reading, instead of being directed towards a goal, are the consequence of an event that has already occurred. Emotion or mood motivates the reading, and the appearances, thus read, become *expressive*. Such moments have often been described in literature, but they do not belong to literature, they belong to the visible.

Ghassan Kanafani, the Palestinian writer, describes a moment when everything he was looking at became expressive of the same pain and determination:

> Never shall I forget Nadia's leg, amputated from the top of the thigh. No! Nor shall I forget the grief which had moulded her face and merged into its traits for ever. I went out of the hospital in Gaza that day, my hand clutched in silent derision on the two pounds I had brought with me to give Nadia. The blazing sun filled the streets with the colour of blood. And Gaza was brand new, Mustafa! You and I never saw it like this. The stones piled up at the beginning of the Shajiya quarter where we lived had a meaning, and they seemed to have been put there for no other reason but to explain it. This Gaza in which we had lived and with whose good people we had spent seven years of defeat was something new. It seemed to me just a beginning. I don't know why I thought it was just a beginning. I imagined that the main street that I walked along on the way back home was only the beginning of a long, long road leading to Safad. Everything in this Gaza throbbed with sadness which was not confined to weeping. It was a challenge; more than that, it was something like reclamation of the amputated leg.[14]

*

14 G. Kanafani, *Men in* don: Heinemann Educational Books, 1978), p. 79.

In every act of looking there is an expectation of meaning. This expectation should be distinguished from a desire for an explanation. The one who looks may explain *afterwards*; but, prior to any explanation, there is the expectation of what appearances themselves may be about to reveal.

Revelations do not usually come easily. Appearances are so complex that only the search which is inherent in the act of looking can draw a reading out of their underlying coherence. If, for the sake of a temporary clarification, one artificially separates appearances from vision (and we have seen that in fact this is impossible), one might say that in appearances everything that can be read is already there, but undifferentiated. It is the search, with its choices, which differentiates. And *the seen*, the revealed, is the child of both appearances and the search.

Another way of making this relation clearer would be to say that appearances in themselves are oracular. Like oracles they go beyond, they insinuate further than the discrete phenomena they present, and yet their insinuations are rarely sufficient to make any more comprehensive reading indisputable. The precise meaning of an oracular statement depends upon the quest or need of the one who listens to it. Everyone listens to an oracle alone, even when in company.

The one who looks is essential to the meaning found, *and yet can be surpassed by it*. And this surpassing is what is hoped for. Re tion was a visual category before it was a religious one. The of revelation – and this is particularly obvious in ev – is the stimulus to the *will* to all looking which precise functional aim.

Revelation, when what we see does surpas rare than is generally assumed. By its nature easily lend itself to verbalization. The wo thetic exclamations! Yet whate its freq of revelation is, I would sugg humar

this expectation may historically change, but in itself, it is a constituent of *the relation between the human capacity to perceive and the coherence of appearances.*

The totality of this relationship is perhaps best indicated by saying that appearances constitute a half-language. Such a formulation, suggesting both a resemblance to and a difference from a full language, is both clumsy and imprecise, but at least it opens up a space for a number of ideas.

The positivist view of photography has remained dominant, despite its inadequacies, because no other view is possible unless one comes to terms with the revelational nature of appearances. All the best photographers worked by intuition. In terms of their work, this lack of theory did not matter much. What did matter is that the photographic possibility remained theoretically hidden.

What is this possibility?

The single constitutive choice of a photographer differs from the continuous and more random choices of someone who is looking. Every photographer knows that a photograph simplifies. The simplifications concern focus, tonality, depth, framing, supersession (what is photographed does not change), texture, colour, scale, the other senses (their influence on sight is excluded), the play of light. A photograph quotes from appearances but, in quoting, simplifies them. This simplification can increase their legibility. Everything depends upon the quality of the quotation chosen.

The photograph of the man with the horse quotes very briefly. Kertész's photograph outside Budapest railway station quotes at length.

The 'length' of the quotation has nothing to do with exposure time. It is not a temporal length. Earlier we saw that a photographer, through the choice of the instant photographed, may try to persuade the viewer to lend that instant a past and a future. Looking at the man with rse, we have no clear idea of what has

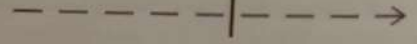
just happened or what is about to happen. Looking at the Kertész, we can trace a story backwards for years and forwards for at least a few hours. This difference in the narrative range of the two images is important, yet although it may be closely associated with the 'length' of the quotation, it does not in itself represent that length. It is necessary to repeat that the length of the quotation is in no sense a temporal length. It is not time that is prolonged but meaning.

The photograph cuts across time and discloses a cross-section of the event or events which were developing at that instant. We have seen that the instantaneous tends to make meaning ambiguous. But the cross-section, if it is wide enough, and can be studied at leisure, allows us to see the interconnectedness and related coexistence of events. Correspondences, which ultimately derive from the unity of appearances, then compensate for the lack of sequence.

This may become clearer if I express it in a diagrammatic, but necessarily highly schematic, way.

In life it is an event's development in time, its duration, which allows its meaning to be perceived and felt. If one states this actively, one can say that the event moves towards or through meaning. This movement can be represented by an arrow.

Normally a photograph arrests this movement and cuts across the appearances of the event photographed. Its meaning becomes ambiguous.

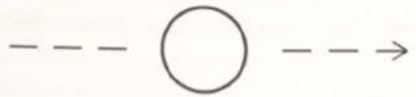


Only by the spectator's lending the frozen appearances a supposed past and future can the arrow's movement be hypothesized.

Above I represented the photographic cut by a vertical line. If, however, one thinks of this cut as a cross-section of the event, one can represent it frontally, as it were, instead of from the side, as a circle. One then has a diagram like this.

The diameter of the circle depends upon the amount of information to be found in the event's instantaneous appearances. The diameter (the amount of information received) may vary according to the spectator's personal relation to the photographed event. When the man with the horse is a stranger, the diameter remains small, the circle a very reduced one. When the same man is your son, the amount of information gleaned, and the diameter of the circle, increase dramatically.

The exceptional photograph which quotes at length increases the diameter of the circle even when the subject is totally unknown to the spectator.



This increase is achieved by the coherence of the appearances – as photographed at that precise conjuncture – extending the event beyond itself. The appearances of the event photographed implicate other events. It is the energy of these simultaneous connections and cross-references which enlarge the circle beyond the dimension of instantaneous information.

Thus, the discontinuity which is the result of the photographic cut is no longer destructive, for in the photograph of the long quotation another kind of meaning has become possible. The particular event photographed implicates other events by way of an idea born of the appearances of the first event. This idea cannot be merely tautologous. (An image of a person weeping and the idea of suffering would be tautologous.) The idea, confronting the event, extends and joins it to other events, thus widening the diameter.

How is it possible for appearances to 'give birth' to ideas? Through their specific coherence at a given instant, they articulate a set of *correspondences* which provoke in the viewer a recognition of some past experience. This recognition may remain at the level of a tacit agreement with memory, or it may become conscious. When this happens, it is formulated as an idea.

A photograph which achieves expressiveness thus works dialectically: it preserves the particularity of the event recorded, and it chooses an instant when the correspondences of those particular appearances articulate a general idea.

In his *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel defines individuality as follows:

> Every self-consciousness knows itself (1) as universal, as the potentiality of abstracting from everything determinate, and (2) as particular, with a determinate object, content and aim. Still, both these moments are only abstractions; [illegible] and every individual is concrete; [illegible] particular as its opposite. [illegible] has been equalised with the universal. [illegible]

15 Georg W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right* [illegible] Press, 1975), p. 7

In every expressive photograph, in every photograph which quotes at length, the particular, by way of a general idea, has been equalised with the universal.

A young man is asleep at the table in a public place, perhaps a café (see p. 94). The expression on his face, his character, the way the light and shade dissolve him and his clothes, his open shirt and the newspaper on the table, his health and his fatigue, the time of night: all these are visually present in this event and are particular.

Emanating from the event and confronting it is the general idea. In this photograph the idea concerns legibility. Or, more precisely, the distinction, the stroke, between legibility / illegibility.

Remove the newspapers on the table and on the wall behind the sleeping figure, and the photograph will no longer be expressive – until or unless what replaces them instigates another idea.

The event instigates the idea. And the idea, continuing the event, urges it to go beyond itself and to represent the generalisation (what Hegel calls the abstraction) carried within the idea. We see a particular young man asleep. And seeing him we ponder on sleep in general. Yet this pondering does not take us away from the particular; on the contrary, it has been instigated by it and everything we continue to read is in the interest of the particular. We think to feel or remember through the appearances recorded in the photograph, and with the idea of legibility / illegibility which was instigated by them.

The print of the newspaper the young man was reading before he fell asleep, the print of the newspapers hanging on the wall, which we can almost read even from this distance – all written news, all written regularity and timetables – have for him become temporarily unreadable. And at the same time, what is going on in his sleeping mind, the key to it receiving from his fatigue, are unreadable for us, or for anybody else who was waiting in the