

# REALISM AND THE PHOTOGRAPHIC IMAGE

BY  
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**T**HE basis of our faith in photographic realism continues to break down. Consider the difference between the points of focus of the camera's image and the "points" on the original subject. The latter are hypothetical points that reflect light and are assumed to exist *ad infinitum*. The points made on the film are determined by the lens' capacity to resolve and focus light waves. The image of any lens, when enlarged sufficiently, will break down from microscopic points to grainy areas of tone. Even the holograph, with the theoretical capacity to resolve detail the size of a wavelength of light, still has limits. Nonetheless the holograph's greater technical realism exceeds the limits of our biological mechanism to distinguish between the reproduction and that which is reproduced. The gap between stimulus and perception underlies the fabrication of both photographs, and environments and artifacts designed to create "atmosphere": profil producing psychosis wherein people are cajoled, through perceptual manipulation, into accepting, desiring and paying to experience the world in ways other than it is known to be. Automotive engineers design intergalactic module interiors, architects create Disneyesque theme communities, and the Disney Corporation builds complete, robotized fantasy Worlds and Lands. Additionally, photography affirms the substantiality of these atmospheres. Advertising photography is the dimensional warp through which we glimpse what seems to be an ongoing parallel universe infinitely more desirable than our own, yet, as testified to by the images, every bit as real and attainable.

Advertising photography is based on the nature of optics and our faith in the absolute reliability of its testimony.

Light is the only sensitivity of lens and film. Our belief that a camera records an object or scene accurately, is predicated on a verifiable correlation between the image and the visual experience of the human observer. The science of astronomy is comprised of the Holmesian analysis and interpretation of visual and photographic accounts of unexperienced events. Photographs by robot landing craft provide information that can only be understood in terms of analog. It wasn't until a person got to the moon and kicked it around that we had any direct information, other than reflectivity, about the nature of its surface.

As only light generates photographic images, a photograph preserves only what an object *seems* to look like and that is far removed from what it does look like, and further removed from what it is. We have, however, learned to expect that objects under similar illumination and circumstances reflect light similarly. These patterns are recorded by the camera. This limits photography to a vehicle for recording and communicating only a limited range of information about the world, and like astronomers we must rely on extrapolation and suggestion to fill in enormous gaps.

The major role of photography in contemporary communication is as visual testimony to the validity of the photographer's subjective perceptions. This testimony is virtually irrefutable as the photographic image is self-confirming. With the

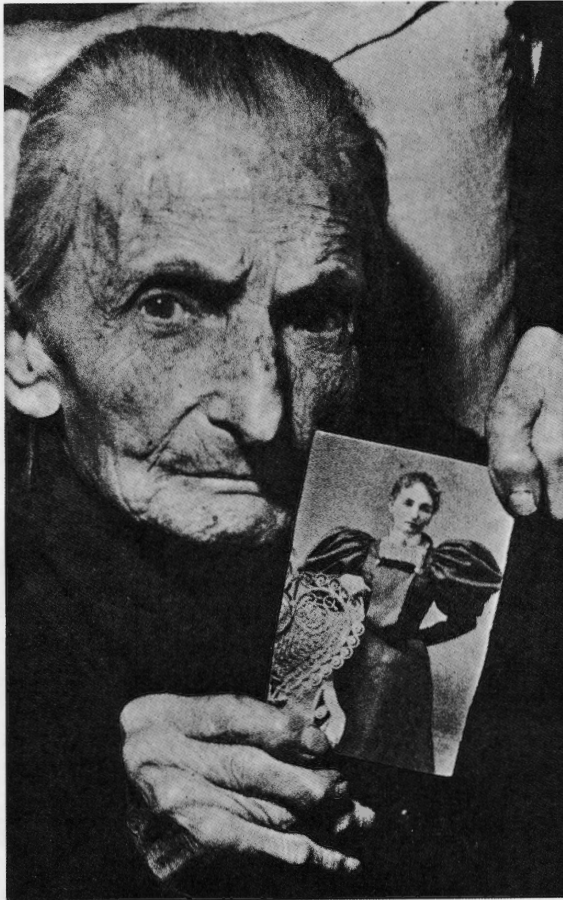


FIG. 1. — An old woman (100 years old), holding a portrait of herself as a young woman.

acceptance of the premise that left alone the unmanipulated lens is objective and the photograph an accurate transposition, an innocent, mathematical record of reality, "objective" camera and lens certify that the world is as it is believed to be. Exclusive dependence on reproducing appearance has, according to Harold Rosenberg, the disadvantage of requiring that the artist (or photographer) conform to the common perception of things (*Reality Again*, in *Super Realism*, Gregory Battcock, Ed. E.P. Dutton, N.Y. 1975). That common perception is what is generally referred to as reality. The camera and its technology are, egosyntonically, a product of that reality, and

create a system without equal for its presentation and perpetuation.

The application of the lens (which is exclusively sensitive to surface pattern and detail) to eroticism resulted in pornography, with its fetishistic concern with anatomical surfaces and genital detail, and like advertising, is an example of the way our vision of the world has evolved in conjunction with the invention and widespread proliferation of photographic imagery. Unlike erotic art, which is an evocative and acknowledgedly subjective fantasy, pornography is a description of an actual event to which the photographer (and by proxy his audience) are voyeurs. In erotic art the exaggeration of genitalia, from the *Venus of Willendorf* to Beardsley's *Lysistrata*, derives from a concern with the participant's point of view, as opposed to that of a passive outside observer. An early appeal of the Polaroid, was that it enabled consumers to sidestep Kodak's prudish censors (who confiscate unwholesome images). Similarly the contemporary Betamax permits the voyeur to be the object of his/her own uroboric voyeurism (instant replay). Aspects of sexual reality most valued are exactly those preserved by the lens. The *Playboy* centerfold has come to epitomize packaged eroticism as a consequence of the employment of the 8" x 10" view camera, one of the most detailed and tonally rich formats, in photography. It is precisely technical evolution that has differentiated the centerfold from the "French postcard", the grainy primal ooze from which all contemporary men's magazines emerged.

People are drawn to images of negativity, perversity and evil, partly because they assist and support the projection onto the world of shared psychic horrors. Photographs of women being abused either explicitly, or implicitly as in advertising, or the photojournalistic images of war and randomly occurring disasters *Life* magazine (and now TV) profited by dispensing, do not merely inform, they also serve to legitimize mysogyny and violence by presenting them as existing independently of the photographer, part of a natural landscape, predating the viewer's awareness of and responsibility for them. Documentary photographers such as Eugene Smith, Jacob Riis, or

Paul Strand utilize this relationship of image and reality, to present their visions of the human condition through a medium that the public is un-equipped and unprepared to refute, and which, through mass reproduction and distribution, has had greater social impact than the original recorded event. The actual confrontation in such images is not between an observing public and an event, but between the public and the conscience or politics of the photographer. If this subjectivity of images is not identified in the body of the work it becomes propaganda. No one, for example, sees Diane Arbus' imagery exclusively as metaphor, since the subjects of her images have been admitted into our collective universe on the credibility of the camera.

Susan Sontag revealed the underlying Nazi aesthetic in Leni Riefenstahl's photographic essay, *Last of the Nuba*, partly by comparing Riefenstahl's aesthetic with her personal history. What is particularly disturbing is that this aesthetic has widespread popular acceptance. The images in

*Nuba* are not far removed from the commonplace images of contemporary media, *i.e.*, the race of supermen that are encountered in *Vogue*, *Playboy*, advertising etc., and against whom we are continuously prodded to compare ourselves and others. Helmut Newton *et. al.*, have elevated the postures and paraphernalia of torture to *haute couture* and elegant acceptability. Compared with the overt sadism of *White Women*, *Last of the Nuba* seems strangely dated and naive, for its fascist/racist aesthetic has been carefully buried in the kind of hypocritical "good taste" that allowed *National Geographic* to print images of bare-breasted natives as semi-erotic, anthropological curios, or Andre de Dienes to photograph well-endowed nymphets prancing across western wastelands under the juxtaposed scrutiny of native Americans decked out in full tourist-inspired regalia. The uncritical acceptance of Riefenstahl's work suggests that some of the psychic material that made the Third Reich possible is not as foreign as we would like to think. The distribution of such imagery legitimizes its content. The camera has become an extraordinarily subtle tool for propaganda as there are few verbal arguments that can refute the evidence or offset the impact of a photographic image (fig. 2).

The mass marketing of automatic cameras and equipment, has, like the promulgation of Renaissance theology, supported the eclipse of social functions by technical procedures. Though optics is subject to physical laws, it is implied that with a camera a person can transcend personal mortality and reweave the fabric of the universe. Kodak's sentimentalization of the fleetingness of the shared family experience in an industrial culture, exploits feelings of insecurity and fear of death, suggesting that through lens and emulsion we can preserve an ever-expanding past, and even implying that experiences are not real *until* they are made so by the camera.

"... You wake up and suddenly it is hard to find / The memories you've left behind. / Reach back for the joys and sorrows. / Here comes the setting sun. / The seasons are passing one by one. / So gather moments while you may; / Collect the dreams you dream today."

(Kodak commercial, 1979).



FIG. 2. — *Le Parrainage des vieux*, 1940. The distribution of such imagery legitimizes its content.



FIG. 3. — Albert Lenoir and his family in the garden at the Ecole des Beaux - Arts, Paris, ca. 1867. The experience of having a picture taken was as important to the subject as the resultant images were to those who preserved them.

Actually, photography as snapshot has been absorbed into an ancient, ongoing tradition: the collection and transmission of oral family history (just as photojournalism has been absorbed into the creation and transmission of social history). In the family album the caption, a distilled narrative, substitutes for the verbal account when the chronicler is not available. The family album is rarely looked at in isolation or without commentary or questions. Like the news photo, the significance of the snapshot is lost if the image is not identifiable. Important information is often marked on the back — sometimes the front — such as date, location, identities, etc. Individual images are neither inviolable nor self-explanatory. They are the servants of history, the album, a catalogue of appearances. Prior to the invention or availability of photography, other devices provided similar mnemonic/illustrative functions. Quilting is a traditional American folk art, and like the photo album is a scrapbook of day-to-day life. Many with rural childhoods will recall a family member narrating episodes in the family history, provoked by pieces of material in a quilt. Home movies, like the snapshot album, also derive from oral traditions. Home movie mime — waving, pointing, etc. — is structurally more akin to the animated, hieroglyphic sign language of

the deaf, or the symbolic, narrative mime of the hula dance than the graphic, two-dimensional language of painting, drawing and photography.

Snapshot photography is based, in part, on a misunderstanding and romanticization of the objectivity of the lens, and embodies the essential expectations of all photographers: the corroboration of testimony and the validation of perception. We did not send astronauts to Yosemite and Ansel Adams to the moon, as Yosemite is familiar and the moon alien. We feel we can afford the luxury of comparing Adams' romanticism with our own perceptions, but require neutrality from Zeiss' surrogate eye. Although we value the subjective personal visions of artists and seek them out like Greeks sought out oracles from Sybils, the collective subjectivity with which we view all photographic imagery is too much a part of our own cultural structure to be easily recognized.

Like all photographs, snapshots reflect their maker's vision of the world. Until the beginning of the 20th century, snapshot albums were comprised of autophotographic self-portraits, from which the aesthetic of the photographer is absent, and the photograph is the product of the interaction of the subject and the camera. The snapshot album was a concise accounting of fa-

mily history. The experience of having a picture taken was as important to the subject as the resultant images were to those who preserved them (fig. 3). With the innovations of and marketing pressure from Kodak, Polaroid, *et. al.*, the family album underwent a transformation. Although taking snapshots continued to be a ritual act, collected images were no longer a concise accounting of family history, but an elaborate series of images documenting the attempt to reaffirm and regenerate the lives of the participants.

William Reid observed about Northwest coast native American art: "When we look at a particular work... and see the shape of it, we are looking at its afterlife. Its real life is the movements by which it got that shape." Two generations of snapshot albums are composed of images made with cheap, sometimes plastic lenses and printed on materials of limited longevity, for the criteria of fine art photography do not apply to the rituals of the folk medium. Cognizant of their process-oriented market, camera manufacturers have invested enormous amounts of research making snapshotting easier to do. Polaroid's introduction of a self-focusing camera, and Kodak's push to finer grain color films are not efforts towards increased sharpness and

detail as much as the greater convenience that self-focusing and pocket-sized cameras afford. The recent emergence and promotion in the amateur market, of the new generation of professional quality 35 mm cameras has occurred just when the maximum in technical convenience has been achieved in amateur equipment (short of making a camera sensitive to transmitted thought waves, requiring merely the wish to have a picture to activate it), and has resulted in a general improvement in the technical quality of snapshots. That there has been no comparable interest in improving the quality of prints and slides suggests that quality is principally a contrivance to necessitate and provide further convenience, and that there will not be any significant improvement in the quality of prints until the promotion of the easy-access neighborhood processing depot, e.g. Fotomat, has been fully exploited.

In the same way that Renaissance perspective certified the viability of a problematic *welt anschauung*, photographic images continue to support the fantasy that snapshot photographers and their subjects are participants in other than an alienating society. Because of the discrepancy between the wish and the actuality, the images must be produced and consumed steadily, like so many tranquilizers in a world of relentless



FIG. 4. — The *Président de la République Française* welcome by youth, ca. 1930 (M. Mille-  
rand). Such images must be  
produced and consumed like  
tranquilizers.

and unendurable tension (fig. 4). It is the superimposition of this need onto the oral tradition, that produces encounters with endless slides and footage of family holidays and events, and as Susan Sontag points out, it is ironic that this furious celebration of family occurs just at the time when the nuclear family has emerged as the principle family unit.

The contemporary movement in painting, super/photo realism is predicated on the two basic premises that also underlie the faith in the accuracy of the lens' communication of shared realities. First is the belief that realism is the function of optical detail, and second, that in itself the lens' reduction of the three-dimensional world into patterns of surface reflections has currency as realism. By comparison, reality in the work of such painters as del Sarto or Michelangelo, Monet or Turner, or the ancient Egyptians, is described differently. For del Sarto and Michelangelo, for example, light described volume not surface. Veasquez and Vermeer, on the other hand, utilizing the patterning characteristic of the lens, replaced infinite depth with arbitrary and variable areas of clarity. Vermeer even incorporated the lens' rigid limitations of depth of field. Contemporarily, the work of John Clem Clarke, with its broad patterns of tone, or Philip Pearlstein, although not detailed, draws on the characteristic photographic look and are considered realist paintings. The exact duplication of a photograph in pigment is a certification of the images, correspondence with the common perception of things. Chuck Close's obvious use of a mathematical grid testifies to the precision and faithfulness of the painted reproduction of an image that would be perceived by a non-photographic culture as being as codified as hieroglyphs. Through photography, light-long regarded by painters from Mascaccio to the Impressionists as an alchemical touchstone has been transformed into an optical errand boy, apprentice to the sorcery of lens and emulsion.

Super/photo realism owes the surrealism of its imagery to the fact that painters copy improvisational snapshot and autophotographic postcard (the collective journey narrative) imagery, each a single link in the chain of an oral tes-

timony, and isolate them from their narrative context. Separated from this historical context the images can not make sense, and the result is a feeling of disjointed, surreal, fragmented time; the insignificant made timeless. In the same way, surrealist paintings of the thirties owed much of their strangeness to the calculated isolation of Freudian dream images from the context of the dream. The lens' dispassionate monumentalization of trivia and its equally dispassionate trivialization of everything else derives in great measure, from taking the image out of its social/cultural context and looking at it as an isolated curio or work of art.

Photography became art at the turn of the century and profitable in the last two decades. However, the recent jubilant clasping of photography to the bosom of mainstream culture seems artificial in light of the depth to which photography and the language of the lens is interwoven into the fabric of that culture. Photography is a natural outgrowth of Renaissance theology, as was perspective and the *camera obscura*. Each culture produces those technologies, cosmologies and mythologies that enable it to perpetuate itself. The sculptor, Albert Terris has said that art is the lubricating fantasy. To the degree that we do not understand the source of the images that we produce and consume (*i.e.* instant pictures, or automated cameras) and rely on the knowledge of others to manufacture them, and to the degree that we adapt sophisticated, modern technologies to pre-existing human expressions and traditions without understanding these technologies, we are participants in an image-oriented, instamatic cargo cut. The endless and wasteful cascade of images of familial togetherness, in light of the post-industrial-age destruction of community and its tragic commercial exploitation and ultimate trivialization, denies the psychological/social importance of family history. We laugh at primitives who fear the camera will "steal their souls", yet tout an artist who "captures a truth", as the camera is a product of *our* technological *welt anschauung* and certifies our faith in the viability of that self-same system.

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