

PHOTOGRAPHY: METAMORPHOSIS OF REALITY

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The field of social documentary photography appears as an area of interest to social scientists owing to its subject matter as well as to the particular issues it poses within the broad context of the relationship of art and reality (Kolodny 1974). Social documentary photography takes cultural reality as its subject—be it a specific community such as Bruce Davidson's *East 100th Street*, or a generalized community such as *The Family of Man*. The metamorphosis of existential reality into an aesthetic medium is not unique to photography; it appears, however, that photography's particular qualities, both ontological and phenomenological, create a special *kind* of metamorphosis. That photographs bear an uncanny likeness to the world of everyday reality has been noted since the inception of the medium. That the air of 'factuality', of 'truthful' representation are part of the photographic mystique likewise has been a dominating feature in commentary. On viewing the images made by Matthew Brady at the Battle of Antietam, Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote in 1863:

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

This kindred relationship to the world of experience cannot be overlooked in understanding photography.

That photography can be an art seems an accepted fact after more than a century of debate. As aesthetic objects they exemplify certain traits which appear in the domain of 'Realism.' The fallacy which may occur here is that their representational mode may overshadow the aesthetic qualities which make them art.

All art, even that which records objective factual data, contains various degrees of abstraction—from literal exposition to the use of more general structures that order data into systems of information... While somewhat representational pictures may exist at a low level of abstraction, every mode of representation requires a structure of portrayal, and therefore every picture is to some degree abstract. (Borden 1972:45)

One aspect of the "structure of portrayal" characteristic of photography which has been noted as a feature of 'Realism' (e.g. Photo-Realism) is the

Rendering [of] images by means of a uniform technical procedure [which] can result in a feeling of hyper-reality—all areas are executed through conventional methods of representation, no account is taken of the idiosyncrasies of natural perception. (Borden 1972:50)

An example of this quality can be seen in Davidson's images of the residents of Spanish Harlem (1970). All images are of uniform size and are rendered in varying degrees of darkness; consistent frontality and eye contact confront the viewer.

The aesthetic qualities or formal properties of photographs interact with the content of the images; the 'information' aspect of a photograph may dominate in its presentation. In distinguishing between the "aesthetic object" and the "signifying object" Mikel Dufrenne writes that

any work which attempts to be true in terms of the external world and not in terms of itself, that is, any work which claims that its meaning is verified in reality because it takes account of reality (either by calling us to know the real or by inciting us to act in a concrete way), is not an aesthetic object. (1973:116)

Of interest here is not a dichotomy between signifying and aesthetic objects but in understanding a continuum. For objects that tend to fall nearer the signifying pole, as Dufrenne sees photography (1973:118,361-362), the propensity to treat them primarily as dispensers of knowledge is greater. In such a situation the photograph tends to move out of the aesthetic sphere, characterized by the contemplative mode, and appeals to ordinary perception, the "naturalistic" attitude characteristic of our day-to-day pragmatic relationship with reality.

Andre Bazin's interpretation of the photograph is an example of the idea that photography and everyday reality share a special affinity:

In spite of any objections our critical spirit may offer, we are forced to accept as real the existence of the object reproduced, actually RE-presented, set before us, that is to say, in time and space. Photography enjoys a certain advantage in virtue of this *transference of reality from the thing to its reproduction...*The photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it. (1967:13-14, emphasis added)

This view of the photograph is what Dufrenne would see as a shift to the phenomenology of everyday perception where "to comprehend an object...is to locate it in a world of external objects in which action manifests itself" rather than the stance wherein "the world of the work exists in comprehension or intention, not in extension" (1973:359,361).

Perceiving an aesthetic image in a manner which locates it out of the contemplative mode is characteristic of "underdistancing." This concept is a corollary to the phenomena of "psychical distance" formulated by Edward Bullough to account for the seeming 'otherness' of aesthetic experience as being a function of the attitude of contemplation, creating distancing (1957):

...one way in which we relate to our world, one way in which we comport ourselves toward being-in-the-world is that of 'bringing phenomena close' or 'relegating them to remoteness.' Such a phenomenon creates a 'lived' spatiality for us, both with respect to our 'handling'

the things of our world, including the relations into which we enter with other men, and in relation to the moods and affectations of our interior life. (Frazier 1973:392)

For Bullough, the creation of distance is a function of both the object and the observer. In other words, both formal or substantive qualities of the object and/or dispositions and cognitive sets of the observer may relegate the experience to one of 'distance.' 'Under-distancing' would occur when the observer is no longer responding from the contemplative mode; rather, response is generated as if the object was located in the 'real' world. Allie Frazier examines an interesting example of the tension between distancing and under-distancing in religious art where the viewer may be inhibited from an aesthetic response by the competing framework of religious ideology (1973). An examination of this tension in photography should help to reveal the kinds of ideological frameworks through which viewers perceive images as these frameworks are brought to the act of perception and evoked by the image itself. It could also contribute to understanding the possible role of photography in creating modes or dispositions in the viewer for action in the 'real' world, an effect that is desired by those photographers who hope to stimulate social change through their work (e.g. Concerned Photography).

Let us add another dimension to this discussion. Photography, as cultural artifact, is imbued with historically perceived roles and sets of ideological assumptions and perceptions. Among these is one that we can call the surrogate reality function of photographs, indicated in the quote given above by Holmes. One use of this role seems to be applied when putting viewers in touch with exotic phenomena and hazardous circumstances. It is important to note that terms such as 'exotic' and 'hazardous' may be defined in varied and changing ways; for example, this contemporary view that

The complexity of modern urban visual phenomena does not lend itself to the self-absorbed contemplation of an artist before his subject with pencil and paper. The camera is a useful tool in recording visual phenomena under trying circumstances. (Monte 1970:12)

Another role which photography has served is that of a redemptive ideology. For the viewer this may function in several ways. The following appeared in a British magazine in 1871:

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

Other expressions of this function are common in the photographic literature. Lewis Hine's documentary work in the first decades of the 20th century has been praised as "a timeless *humanist* art" in which "He just came closer and closer to that *humanist* essence that binds truth and beauty together" (Gutman 1967:47,48, emphasis added). In analyzing the photographic essay, *The Family of Man*, Jacques Barzun sees "primitivism" as its dominating ideology and philosophy of life (1967).

It is evident that photographs neither exist nor are they perceived only in and for themselves. A photographic document is shaped through its interrelatedness with other parts of the cultural system. Maquet has forcefully pointed out this essential feature of aesthetic phenomena:

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

In applying this theoretical framework to the specific example of "Protest Art" Maquet concludes as follows:

The question that prompted me to discuss protest art was whether the ideological mechanism could generate consistency relationships within a cultural system. The conclusion is that it does not, because it is a function added from outside, as it were—like using art objects as validating marks of social prestige. They fulfill that function too, but it does not give them a new cultural consistency. (1971:31)

What Maquet is stating here is very important for an understanding of how the metamorphosis of reality occurs through the photographic medium. His analysis suggests that transformations will occur in some systematically discernable pattern in a way in which to reinforce prevailing cultural ideologies (or to build on nascent ones). The ideologies mentioned above, which have shaped the role and perception of photographs, would seem to indicate how both the phenomenology of aesthetic perception and the ways in which everyday reality is reified or objectified through mediation of ideology can be better understood. One can then perhaps speak of photographers and photographs as cultural mediators. Bruce Davidson's images, for example, can be seen as taking people out of everyday reality and transforming them into 'fit' objects for aesthetic consumption. From a very different perspective on Spanish Harlem, Michael Abramson has produced a photographic essay entitled *Palante: Young Lords Party* (1971). Here, what is a radical political activity has been transformed through the photographic medium to a different cultural network—the aesthetic (Kolodny 1974:8). Both works, despite radical differences in form and intention, seem to co-exist within the traditional expectations of photographic art. And both works can be said to reinforce a culturally desirable distance between 'ourselves' and an 'Other' (be it 'exotic' or 'hazardous').

The factors which condition what kinds of objects and experiences will be metamorphosed by the aesthetic domain bear significance here as well.

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

strata inside a society such as the peasants. (Maquet 1971:14)

It seems significant that social documentary photography has most frequently taken as its subject those peoples who live in the "Third World" and those who occupy the "weak strata" in our own society (e.g. residents of Spanish Harlem).

One particular study of aesthetic phenomena can be mentioned here as being a model for the kind of critical analysis which can be applied to photography. Robert Goldwater's *Primitivism in Modern Art* (1967) can be taken as both a useful and striking analogy to be applied to an understanding of photographic documents (particularly of the genre under consideration here). In detailing the history of the acceptance and growth of primitive art in the context of Western society he has shown the ways in which objects are metamorphosed into both a material realm and an ideological domain. The abstract and essentialistic perceptions which these objects—wrenched from their cultural and specific existential context—both bred on and fostered in the European toward this art and its makers designated the primitivist assumption. Goldwater concludes as follows:

To sum up, it can perhaps be said that primitivism tends to expand the metaphor of art—by which is meant a well-defined object-form with a definite, precise, and limited if intricate reference—until either by formal simplification or symbolic iconographic generalization, or both, it becomes a symbol of universal reference, and that this process is possible only on the basis of the primitivist assumption (1967: 260-261).

The tendency towards "primitivistic" and "humanistic" generality, overwhelming the cultural and historical specificity of an object or event—be it either the Yorubanness of a sculpture or the Harlem-ness of a photograph—can be understood (and perhaps predicted) given a knowledge of the specific dialectic at work within the art object and between object and milieu. Whether an object will be perceived as a "signifying object" or an "aesthetic object", whether "under-distancing" will occur or "psychical distance" will prevail can only be analyzed within this dual dialectic. Both the integrity of the specific art form and the historical-cultural circumstances that shape its perceptions—as well as the tensions within and between them—must be acknowledged. If art is expressive of ethical ideals—the desired relations between man and man—as Edmund Leach has argued (1954:36-38), an understanding of the aesthetic properties and ideological frameworks which guide and shape the metamorphosis of reality into art assumes importance both for aesthetic and cultural analysis.

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