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Michael Harvey on **John Ruskin**

Martha Gever & Nathalie Magnan on **Lesbian Representation**

Steve Cagan on **Robert Capa**

Reviews of **A.A.E. Disderi**
Rich and Poor
The Bible and the Image

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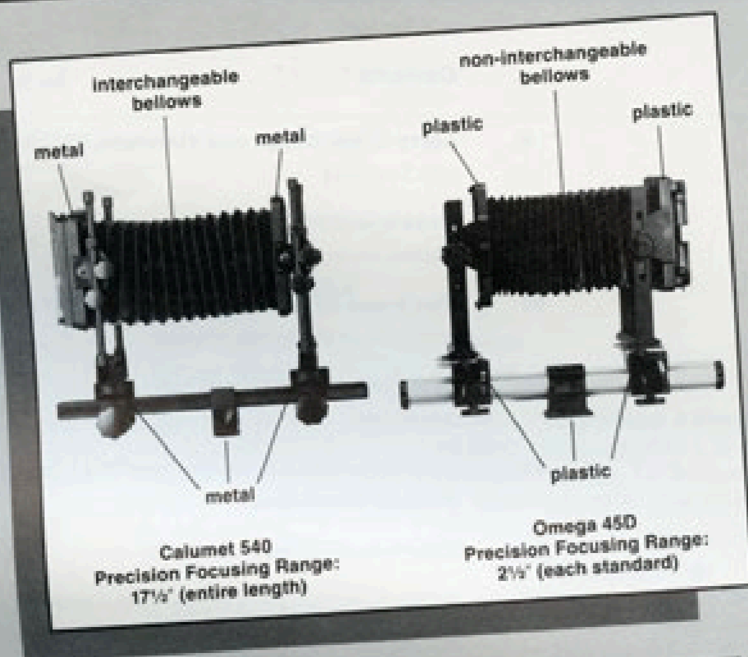

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Larry Clark: Drugs and Violence, Rhythm and Blues

Alex Sweetman

"You tell us what kind of a person you think Larry Clark is after you've examined his great work of art." With these words the prosecuting district attorney waved a copy of the recently published *TULSA* in the air and admitted it in evidence. The jurors took this book with them into the jury room during their deliberations and it became the "chief weapon" against the defendant, Lewis LeGrand Clark Jr., then 31 years of age, accused of armed robbery.

For most people Tulsa is not a book but the oil capital of an oil state, the land of the great land-rush, and of James Cagney playing the *Oklahoma Kid*, a classic example of the peculiarly American breed of outlaw/hero who loves the judge's daughter, and who outwits and out-philosophizes both the good and the bad (played here by Bogart in black). Tulsa was settled by the Creek Indians, who were driven off their Alabama homelands in what became known as the "Trail of Tears," a forced migration which killed half of them. Their tragedy was completed later when they were driven off by the westward movement of the land-hungry white man once again.

Today Tulsa is a modern city surrounded by oil pumps and large ranches, a city which boasts the largest open-plan exhibition space in the world, the International Petroleum Exhibition Hall. Each year entire families come to see one of the largest and most impressive events of all, the Annual Gun and Knife Show. On display is enough hardware to supply an army. Outside the Hall there is a Paul Bunyan-sized statue of an oil rig worker which is matched by what is said to be the largest free-standing bronze sculpture in the world, praying hands at the City of Faith, Oral Roberts University, nearby. Designer jeans are more prevalent than rednecks.

For a few thousand people Tulsa is not a place as much as it is a season in hell, a book done more than a decade ago by Larry Clark about his friends, drugs, violence, sex, death, and the cycles of addiction. *TULSA* began with a brief introduction: "i was born in tulsa oklahoma in 1943." After this we learn that the decisive fact is that at sixteen Clark started "shooting speed." The result or antidote to his first sixteen years of life was a drug habit and an outlaw lifestyle. The conditions of his life and his identity were summed up in the fourth line of this brief story: "once the needle goes in it never comes out." The pictures that followed confessed the central factors of this existence.

TULSA proceeded mostly as pairs of pictures, one to a page, significant combinations of images that often served to develop character or move an action forward in time to extend a situation in almost cinematic narrative fashion. We see: a person holding a gun/the same person in bed with a gunshot wound, a person injecting a drug/the same person experiencing the blurry "rush" after, an arm with a trickle of blood from a vein in the wrist/a face with a tormented expression "coming down." There were longer thematic sequences also. These usually described progress toward death, as when we see a couple in bed, naked, shooting up/the same girl pregnant injecting herself or an older woman outside with flowers/a baby in a coffin.

Another, the last sequence in the 1963 section of the book, shows the phases of a young woman's progressive erosion; pretty and well-kept

at first, she appears increasingly disheveled, confused, then dead. These simple contrasts of before and after, and the larger thematic sequences powerfully established meanings and communicated action, both of time (the destoyer) and the characters (the victims). Dates played a very important part in shaping our experience of that book, linking chronology with characters.

This infamous and long out-of-print bookwork has been reissued by Clark in a facsimile edition. He has also just published a second book, an autobiographical and confessional work titled *Teenage Lust*. Like his first book, it too is about his friends, sex, drugs, violence, death, and the cycles of addiction. In this sense it is a continuation of *TULSA*. But unlike that book, with its sparse text and four dozen pictures, *Teenage Lust* contains almost 30 pages of dense text spoken by Clark transcribed from tapes. (The quoted excerpts throughout this essay are reproduced verbatim from *TULSA* and *Teenage Lust*.) He has said it is as if we were "eavesdropping on a convict telling his story to his cell partner."

There are about ninety photographs, more than twice the number in TULSA, including about two dozen photographs of Clark himself. There is a snapshot of his mom and dad and himself as a young boy seated at a table in a restaurant is the frontispiece, followed by an even younger Clark holding a small plastic camera. Later we see him as a teenager with the great rhythm and blues musician Jimmy Reed. There are also many photographs of himself nude. These snapshots and the many others throughout the book are an important part of the look and feel of this intensely, painfully personal book.

Six color polaroids are reproduced, including four taken while in prison. One of these is of a black and white photograph of an electric chair. The others are a portrait of Clark on New Year's Eve in his cell, a group of prison buddies, and another prisoner holding his child. These are followed by two more, one taken immediately after prison, and another, a year later, which shows Clark's psychological and physical readjustment. In addition to the snapshots, photographs of snapshots, and photographs, there is a montage of about twenty photographs depicting teenagers performing a variety of sex acts in pairs and groups. Four pages of newspaper clippings, describing arrests, trials, etc., as well as a copy of the warrant for his arrest for "assault and battery with a deadly weapon with intent to kill," provide evidence and information supporting the text.

Although *Teenage Lust* follows a linear chronology, it is much looser and less systematic than *TULSA*. It is less of a bookwork and more of a documentary photobook, almost an album or scrapbook with assorted documents and keepsakes with captions and titles printed by hand below the pictures. It reminds us of another autobiographical book by his friend Danny Seymour, *A Loud Song*, and is in fact dedicated to both Seymour, who is now dead, and his book. (This book was also published by Lustrum Press around the time *TULSA* was first published.) The stated theme of "teenage lust" is actually only a motif: the real subject of *Teenage Lust* is Clark himself, his life and his photography before, during, and after *TULSA*.

▪ ▪ ▪

"My grandfather was L.C. Crump, my grandmother was Ora Crump, and her father was a full blooded Indian." Thus begins the story of an American boy born and raised in Tulsa and proud of it. His father, a traveling salesman, met and married Clark's mother soon after she graduated from high school in Tulsa. The parents traveled extensively selling books for a Chicago-based company so the children were raised primarily by the grandparents. Clark had two sisters, one older and one younger.

While Clark was still a child his grandfather went to the hospital and never returned, a fact that raised suspicions in his impressionable mind. There was talk that the man died because he refused to be castrated. Soon the grandmother whom he loved dearly began having strokes and acting strangely. She was finally struck by a car and killed while on her way to the store. He felt responsible for her death, but his guilt was repressed and transposed —

this profound trauma became a "movie," and a "drama," not real life. It is no accident that he feels this way about his photographs as well.

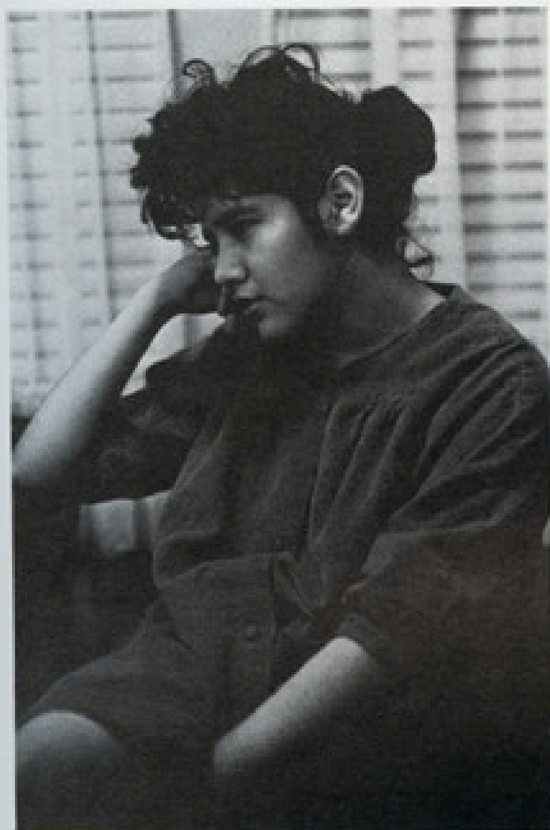
Eventually the parents stopped traveling and went into the business of photographing babies. The mother worked all day and often into the night — six 5x7s for $10.95 — as the father slowly but steadily withdrew from family life. When Clark was in seventh grade he recalls sitting in the living room as his father walked by and said, "You look like shit." After this, he no longer spoke to his son and stayed upstairs in his room. Just exactly what he did upstairs remained a mystery for a number of years until one day it was discovered that his father was watching T.V. This episode is described with a great deal of resentment as well as guilt; the father taught him nothing, and perhaps that is what the young boy with no self-esteem deserved.

In the eighth grade Clark was thrown out of school for fighting with a teacher. The only school that would take him then was on "the other side of the tracks." Here he met the people who became the main subjects of his life and his photography work: Billy Mann ("a little tough kid"), David Roper ("a real terror"), and Jackie Davis ("the toughest kid in the school" and a five time looser before he died from an overdose). None of Clark's friends had fathers. He alone would finish high school. At sixteen Clark was six feet tall, 120 pounds, had big ears and a big nose, was injecting amphetamine, "stammering like crazy," and going door to door as a baby photographer for his mother. He says he hated himself.

As his parents became more deeply involved in a national organization of professional photographers they began to think that photography could be a career for their son. They soon met a certain charismatic person who said he would get Clark into an art school in Milwaukee and teach him photography. Clark went there and jokingly recalls becoming an "artist." He learned to use available light and especially to shoot into the light to create an effect, an aesthetic, which granulates and softens the hard world, similar to certain drug experiences.

In 1963 he returned to Tulsa and his friends and made the photographs that were included in the first section of *TULSA*. Others are included in *Teenage Lust*. These photographs describe the ups and downs of the drug. We see anxiety, injections, the "rush," parties, horror, ecstasy and death. The body given over to sensation seeks the total thrill and is driven by the largely unconscious quest for self-annihilation. Like a modern passion play, we see a drama of guilt and expiation through suffering and death unfold before our astonished eyes.

In 1964 he went to New York City and was drafted. Two years in the army go by without mention. Then in 1967 he is in the East Village, using heroine, playing music, and living with and off a group of prostitutes, some of whom were very successful at getting drugs from doctors. In 1968 he returns to Tulsa "to produce a movie on police characters and what makes them tick," as the newspaper article describing his arrest for possession of marijuana put it. Portions of this footage —



dead

scratched, over-exposed, grey, and impersonal — are used to express or evoke 1968 in that section of *TULSA*. They evoke violence done to self and others. We see a hideous gash, hard faces, and a beating. In *Teenage Lust* the same quality of film strips is used to show a couple in bed having sex. On another page we see a strip of film of a man laughing and frozen at the same time.

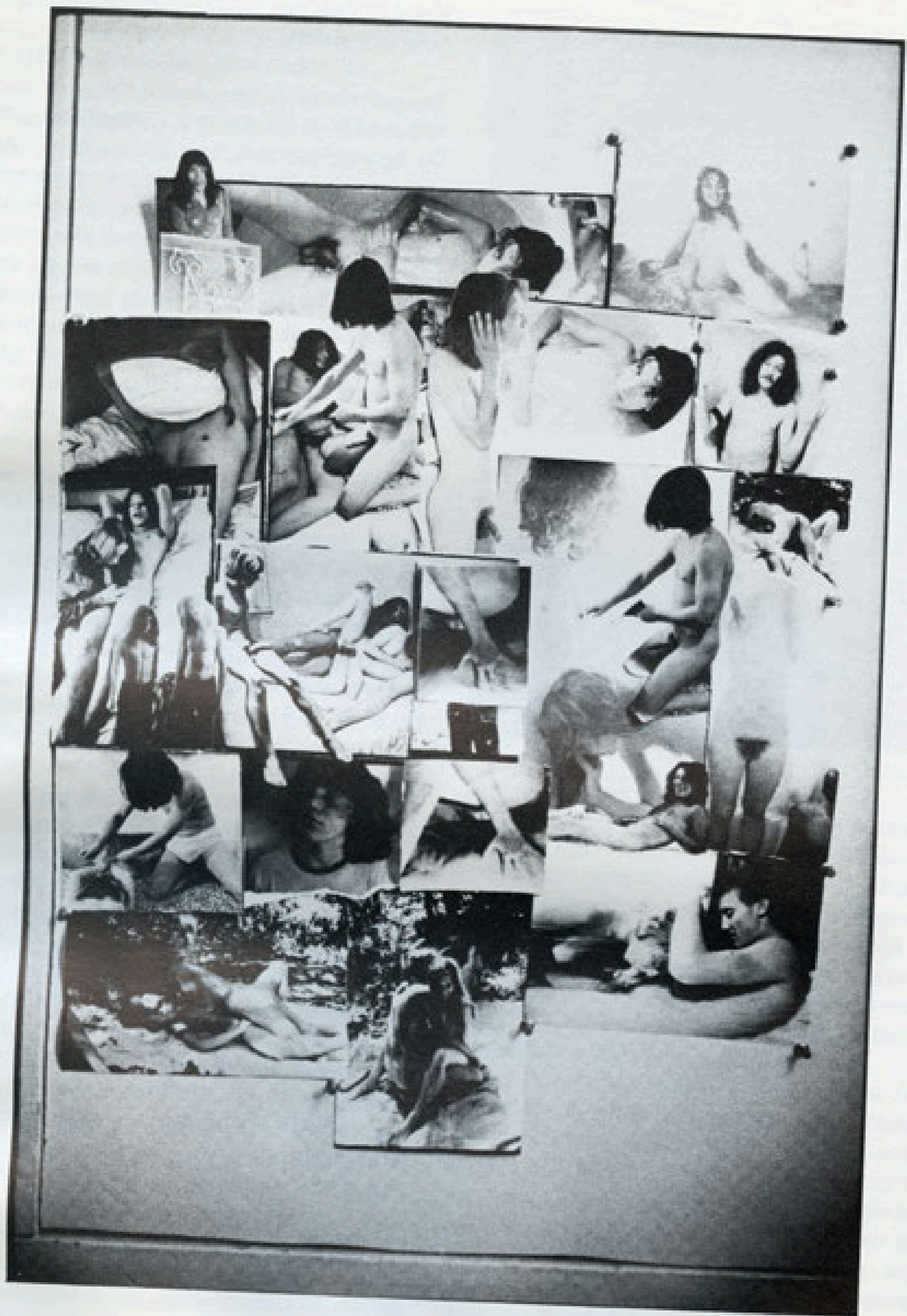
He ends up in Santa Fe with a rich college girl, recovering from all the hard drugs and getting "healthy." He says: "I got to relive all my teenage years as a normal teenager, just a normal kid with all those real teenagers, but I'm older. So I got to relive it under perfect conditions. And it was all real innocent and all real healthy.... We would all take acid and smoke weed, play...." Then Clark's younger sister arrived "fucked up on speed with her outlaw husband. And told me Tulsa was shaking with my two oldest friends back in action." He returned to Tulsa two days after Billy Mann had died from an overdose.

Billy Mann is the central symbol of *TULSA*. The last picture of him alive is the cover photo. Inside the book his picture is labeled "dead 1970." On the page next to it there is a statement, "death is more perfect than life." It is as if the evidence has been weighed and the judgement brought in. Holding a gun, as if for the snapshot portrait which catches him as he looks to one side, Billy seems a child, not a dead man, his gun a toy, not a lethal weapon. An air of harmless innocence, childish weakness, and unconscious purity betrays our sense of the meaning of all that has gone before. Our understanding reaches its limit. A tragic sense of life communicates with full force the absurd, opaque juncture of life and death.

The pattern of turmoil and torment objectified in the photographs and explained in detail in the afterword in *Teenage Lust* describe a pattern of contradictions over which these individuals or, by implication, many others as well, have no control. The structure of *TULSA*, the sequence of the photographs, and the testimony of Clark's autobiography reveal the unceasing modification of personality as it submits to the dual mechanisms of time and habit. Victims of their own willing, these characters' lives are strictly determined within the very narrow limits of a sordid world. We see a world detached from any moral considerations and driven to destruction by a vacuum within. Death hums in the background: "once the needle goes in it never comes out."

These facts sustain the deadly pessimism of Clark's photography. People submerged in their habits are unconscious of the larger world in which they live; they are also unaware of the very meaning of their lives. Their nihilism makes destiny separate from awareness. In these photographs we see life and death with the cold glass eye of the camera. We notice the baby in the coffin, for example, but we find ourselves drawn to the way the minister's hair is so crisply parted.

The gun is both symbol and reality, alternately self-destruction and manhood. We sense that the gun, like sex and drugs, compensates for human futility and eases the way to oblivion. Violence, sex



TULSA 1973

and drugs are all tools of power, coercion, and control, repeatedly linked to physical and emotional violence against self and others. "1971" continues: babies are born dead, mothers die, people shoot themselves and others, brothers and sisters commit incest, children are corrupted. Writing about this period Clark said, "I knew I had to have some violence…sex and drugs, but I had no idea it was going to be the kids next door." In the absence of fathers, older brothers become the teachers.

TULSA was published and became a sensation. Clark returned to Tulsa "to take the heat," but also to return to his people and to the only life he knew, the kind of exciting life that "makes photographs happen." Everyone who knew him told him that those days were over, but what did they know.

> **So anyway I go back and I start photographing where I left off. I had photographed the kids at the end of the *TULSA* book...and started photographing them. And they were like fifteen years old, right? So then I saw what they were into, these little kids. And I started thinking about things I hadn't photographed when I was a kid because I hadn't been a photographer then... Skip's first shot. Real cute. Viki's brother Alex on 'ludes in Oklahoma City...**

The cover of *Teenage Lust* is a photograph done at this time of a couple of kids engaged in foreplay in the backseat of a car. This is the mythic back seat, the locus of the American teenagers' courting ritual which everyone knows about, where many have been, but which has never been photographed. It is presented to us here as the symbol that epitomizes *Teenage Lust* as well as "teenage lust."

But the picture is not the reality, it is a document of the fantasy, both Clark's and our own. In both *Teenage Lust* and in *TULSA* sex is either meaningless or meaningfully bleak. We are reminded of the "gangbang" photograph from *TULSA*: it shows three kids, nude, waiting for more drugs and sex while on the wall above them a monster in a poster from some horror film watches.

We may recall Marshall McLuhan's interpretation of these monsters in his book *The Mechanical Bride*:

> **for those from whom the sex act is merely the meeting and manipulation of body parts, there often remains a hunger which can be called metaphysical but is not recognized as such, and which seeks satisfaction in physical danger, or sometimes in torture, suicide or murder. Many of the Frankenstein fantasies depend on the horror of a synthetic robot running amok in revenge for its lack of 'soul'...a dim resentment of it being deprived full human status?**

In retrospect, it looks like Clark's return to *TULSA* leads directly to the penitentiary. But first he runs amok. He lives for two years with a prostitute

who "tricks" doctors in exchange for drugs. They travel around the country in a hearse and, for a while, two hearses. As time goes on he becomes increasingly out of control. He shoots one person, stabs another, is arrested for shoplifting, drunk driving, carrying a weapon while on parole, etc. Finally, he is given a five year sentence. Ironically, jail probably saved his life.

> **...it seemed so stupid, it just seemed so dumb. All of it. See, I don't know: you just get into a kind of life, and it, you know, snowballs on you...it's not so easy to get in and jump out. Have things make sense. And you can't organize and order. You don't have these choices, you just do what you have to do. I mean, for some reason when you look back on this, and I mean, doing the *TULSA* book even, how could someone do that! How could someone be that kind of worker, do that kind of work, be that kind of photographer, unless they were looking at it, you know, in a funny way! I mean, Billy Mann way back then used to say to me, "This isn't a play Larry. This isn't a movie. This is real fuckin' life." So it was real life. And other people didn't think it was a play or film, but I did.**

There is a photograph in *Teenage Lust* of Clark. He has no shirt on and a belt is tied around his arm, still bleeding from an injection. His hands are up as if the camera was a gun pointed at him. He is very stoned and at the same time dragged toward self-awareness by being photographed. He seems helpless, pinned like a butterfly against the wall, a victim of his own willing, courting death in the sensational alternation of ecstasy and despair. This image of himself as the tragic fool, not the lovely fantasy of teenage sex, is the real symbol of his autobiography. Clark's world is a vernacular theater of cruelty. His life is like that described by

Antonin Artaud in "On Suicide" — "a radiance of dead ends that culminates in me."

The phenomenon expressed in *TULSA* and *Teenage Lust* characterizes an impulse of our age. Artaud, the visionary madman and addict, who declared himself to be "the man who has best charted his inmost self," may furnish us with insight into the mechanism of this impulse. Artaud writes:

> **I'm a man who has lost his life and is seeking by every means to reintegrate it in its proper place. In a way I'm the animator of my whole vitality; a vitality more precious to me than conscience for what to others is only the means of being a Man is for me the whole Reason.**

This devaluation of conscience is intrinsic to the slow suicide of drugs. We should recognize its logic.

Time, implying the linear organization of life into past, present and future, cannot exist. The written and unwritten philosophy of drugs, a philosophy very much a part of our age, is rooted in sensation, the physical body and its vitality. This body mediates between what we regard as "I" and the world "out there." The world for us depends upon this body. Linked to the world in countless ways, it belongs less to us than us to it. It has no past or future; it is always the present itself. The use of drugs plunges one into this world without time, a world all now, where one can only live for the moment, where one is forced to submit to the commands of the moment. We should not be surprised, then, that someone immersed in this world is unable to hear a message about the future, for there is none. Morality does not exist. Conscience cannot exist. In a world that negates time death can have no meaning, it just happens.

This picture of Clark as tragic fool is followed by two photographs, two frames shot in succession of himself and his "girl" reflected in a mirror. She is shooting up and he is photographing them. In the other picture they are both making "cheesy" smiles for the camera. On the adjacent page we see her again. She is holding some printed matter which says in bold letters, "I AM ONE OF GOD'S MISTAKES." Below this, in smaller type, "Now He's Coming to Erase Me."

Clark is paroled on the condition that he leaves Oklahoma. He goes to New York City. The book concludes with 16 photographs taken on 42nd Street of male prostitutes, mostly teenagers. These children no longer have anything to lose but themselves. They, like the kids next door in Tulsa, have been educated by the street and learned to live by their wits and the wisdom of their reflexes, without thinking. They sell their sex because the only thing they have is their vitality. But why is Clark interested in them?

Prostitution is a metaphor for consumer society. One works at a job one does not like in order to get money to buy what one does like. The central myth is one of metamorphosis through consumption.

TULSA 1973

This fantasy of transcendance, this illusion, somehow makes reality bearable (although it often makes reality less bearable). Drugs epitomize the conditions of our world. Like Alice in Wonderland, all one need do is take a pill and be transformed. Our whole notion of freedom of choice has become freedom of choice in the market place.

This may explain the reason why Clark ends up on 42nd Street — now Clark, too, is a hustler, a prostitute, servicing the despised "Johns." He is the artist selling his sex *(Teenage Lust)* and the story of his manhood *(TULSA)* to a bourgeois audience who enjoys these voyeuristic offerings from an underworld it will never directly encounter, except perhaps as "Johns" or as victims of a crime. His audience must be primarily heterosexual because he says that the gallery-goers missed the point of the photographs of the hustlers. They did not understand "the look." His autobiography ends on this note: "The picture is of what the kid is offering. The kid is offering himself...it's all polished up. It's point of sale."

Walker Evans, in a book review in 1931, pointed out that there was a corpse in one of the books under discussion "because you like nice pictures." On one level, this ugly and horrifying account of the life of a "bad guy" is a classic example of what in French is described as *épater le bourgeoisie*, in this case immaculately printed by Meriden Gravure on a lovely coated stock, and sewn.

These deluxe edition nightmares are the story of someone's life. We are given an example of that vision of moral ruin that has formed much great art for two centuries, except here is a personalized version, not the disasters of war but a personal Guernica, a visual dirge on a tragic theme. In this sense there is nothing new here — hope turns to despair, dreams turn into nightmares. Clark's autobiography is a negative self-realization, a public proclamation of failure, dead ends, and a seemingly inevitable loss of control and self. If we condemn him, we condemn the world that made him what he is, as well as ourselves as members and participants in the same culture. This, and not Nancy Reagan's cheerful and naive notions of drug rehabilitation, is cultural reality. Clark is an artist, a mouthpiece that gives expression to a segment of society far removed from polite society. His art is symbol and symptom, implicated in collective realities shaping the fate of our society.

Creative expression reveals realities of community life. Censorship and repression cannot change those realities by simply refusing to recognize or accept them. In so doing it builds up social illusions like the belief that more jails will solve the crime problem. The result of such social illusions is the eventual collapse under the impact of reality that was refused recognition. It is and always has been the role of critical realism and negative art to dispell cultural illusion and show things as they are. Because facts seldom speak for themselves they must be made into myth, symbol, and significant representations

that express the life from which they arise. With this in mind, let us return to the final pages of *Teenage Lust*.

The penultimate photograph is of another gangbang that apparently made Clark realize that his life on 42nd Street had come to a dead end. The final photograph is a touching photograph of a tattered snapshot of three little boys dressed up for a photograph. The caption is "Brothers... Last Page." We assume these are the same boys involved in the sordid scene in the preceding picture although this really does not matter. The final note struck by this optimistic snapshot is one of bitterness, resentment and the disappointment of failed or lost possibility. The kids from *TULSA*, as well as the 42nd Street boys, and Clark himself, have grown up all wrong.

There seems to be only one regret expressed in Clark's text, however — regret for a picture not made, a photograph that would have been "sensational" and, therefore, desired by the audience. The regret is that Clark was too stoned on Quaaludes to make a picture of a scene that was taking place right in front of him — one man with a knife holding another man, a naked fat man with a gun, against the wall and cutting him with the knife slowly. All he had to do was pick up the camera and press the trigger.

Autobiography is often a form of self-creation or recreation, a celebration of self. But here there is nothing to celebrate and a great deal to despise. Life itself, having survived all of this, is even a cause for guilt because of all the people who did not survive. This confession makes Clark look bad, and he knows it. But it also makes many other people look bad: the doctors who trade sex for drugs, the hustlers who despise their clients, the audience who desires voyeuristic gratification and especially well illustrated true-to-life views of "how the other half lives," the pharmaceutical companies that manufacture much of the stuff driving these people crazy, fathers who do not or did not talk to their sons, lawyers who get criminals off the hook for handsome fees, women who prostitute themselves for the men they love, and so on. Critics, and especially feminist critics, will find this life story to be an encyclopedia of all that is despicable. The worst things that can be said about photographers and photography will be proven true by Clark's work.

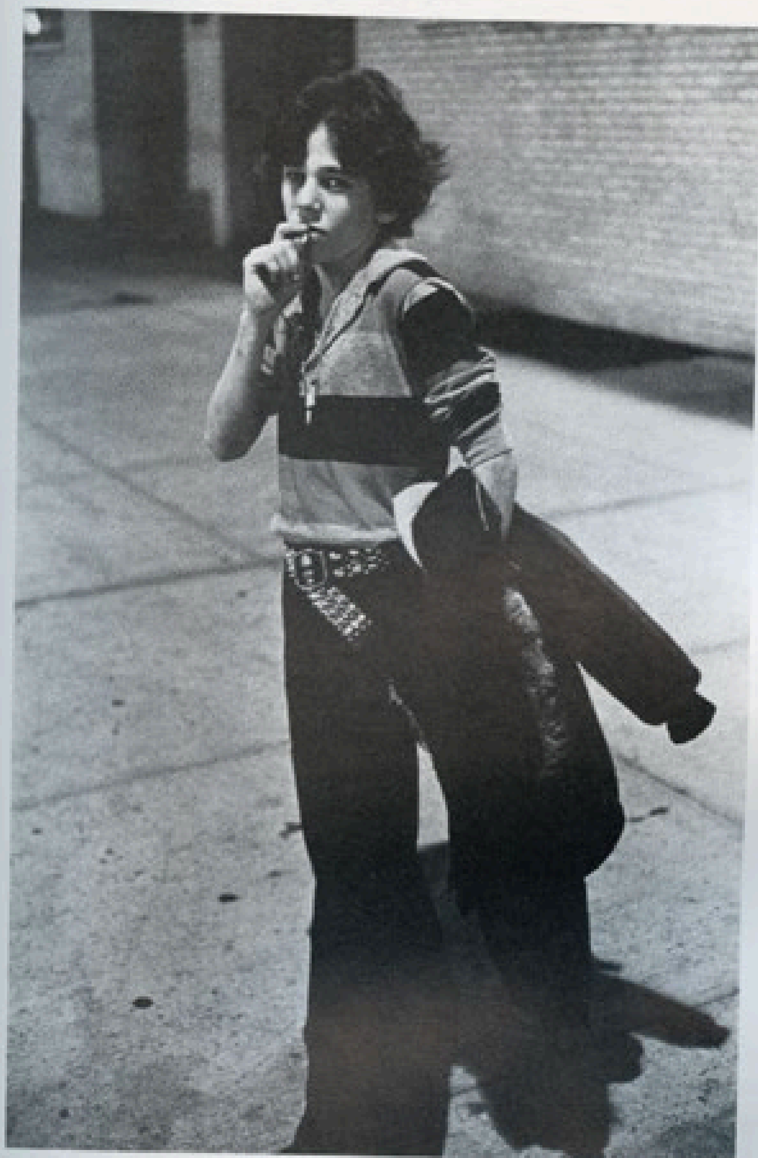
It makes everybody look bad.

▪ ▪ ▪

Documentary photography did exist as a credible and cohesive, though diverse, international movement during the 1930s, characterized by a style and a strong commitment to contemporary reality with an eye toward changing the way things are by showing what needed to be corrected. This attitude had an important effect on the mythology of liberal journalism. The most memorable work done in this period is best described as critical realism, but it has been discussed as expression, documentary expression, and as passionate subjectivity vivifying fact.

This no doubt accounts for the popular notion of the unretouched photograph's unquestionable authenticity, a belief often at odds with its true status. For example, two of the greatest photographs in American history are both fabrications: Flag Raising at Iwo Jima and Gardener's photograph of the dead rebel sharpshooter. One is the permanent symbol of the triumph of the American will to win. The other symbolized the tragedy and loss of the Civil War. Obviously, truth yields to belief, and social needs are often the occasion for mythic projection regardless of the facts.

Today documentary is a pseudo-category that loosely refers to anyone working in a realistic manner, the documentary *style* as Walker Evans called it. The concept of documentary has also been extended backward in time; our recent rediscovery of photography has sent people into the wastebaskets of history to discover all kinds of imagery made for a wide variety of reasons other than art or documentary. The problem is obvious: if Atget, Gene Smith, Lewis Hine, and Larry Clark are all documentary photographers, what does this category mean? One answer is that it means many different things. Since Robert Frank, so-called documentary work has turned away from the classical, seemingly more ob-



Vinnie

jective style of Atget and Evans, to a more subjective, expressionistic and personal mode. History is no longer subject, it has given way to confession and autobiography.

We see ourselves, friends, the facts of our world, the cars we drive, the houses we live in, the clothing we wear. This social mission has been regarded as a noble enterprise: we are shown cultural reality to dispell cultural illusion. The sign on Dorothea Lange's darkroom door for nearly fifty years is characteristic: "The contemplation of things as they are without error or confusion, without substitution or imposture, is in itself a nobler thing than a whole harvest of invention." This noble function, as well as the larger objectives of the documentary movement, were soon co-opted, lost or taken over by the collective enterprise called group or photojournalism. The result has been the corporate management of contemporaneity now scaled down to a more palatable and less demanding version called the daily

Brothers

news. In this context "documentary photography" had to change, had to become more subjective, existential, autobiographical as well as more detached, ironic, hostile and emotional.

But realism has "acceptable limits" beyond which one does not go without earning society's wrath for violating conventions. Clark's work strains these limits, showing and telling us things we have never imagined or suspected, much of which we may not even want to know because it is ugly, painful or embarrassing. But it is precisely his romantic quest for personality, a quest propelled by the conditions of ordinary life and shared by many others, that reveals a background of social erosion to which it contributes and forms a part. Clark's career provides us with a few permanent symbols as well as a great deal of storytelling which cuts to the heart of our time; loss of self, exploitative sexuality, narcissism are contemporary issues whose destructive consequences are everywhere apparent. Now we are offered case studies of extreme and even exemplary conditions which are very real and pervasive.

Ruskin and Photography

Michael Harvey

Consider these two statements:

> **Daguerreotypes taken by this vivid sunlight are glorious things. It is very nearly the same thing as carrying off the palace itself: every chip of stone and stain is there, and of course there is no mistake about proportions ... It is a noble invention — say what they will of it — and anyone who has worked and blundered and stammered as I have done for four days, and then sees the thing he has been trying to do so long in vain done perfectly and faultlessly in half a minute won't abuse it afterwards.**

> **Photographs have an inimitable mechanical refinement and their legal evidence is of great use if you know how to cross-examine them. They are popularly supposed to be 'true' and, at the worst, they are so, in the sense in which an echo is true to a conversation of which it omits the most important syllables and re-duplicates the rest. But this truth of mere transcript has nothing to do with Art, popularly so called, and will never supersede it.**

The first quotation is from a letter written by Ruskin to his father from Venice on 7 October 1845; the

second is an excerpt from his essay, *The Art of Engraving*, published over twenty years later. That he had largely reversed his opinion of photography is interesting though not surprising. It would, after all, be unusual for someone to hold precisely the same views on a subject over a period of twenty years, and especially in the case of Ruskin, who took as much pride in the public recantation of earlier opinions as he did in their original expression. 'I am never satisfied that I have handled a subject properly,' he declared 'until I have contradicted myself at least three times.' Contradictions abound in his reactions to and judgements on photography, though it is possible to chart a course through the maze of his opinions.

In his autobiography, *Praeterita*, Ruskin described how he first came to hear about the invention of photography.

> **It must have been during my last days at Oxford that Mr. Liddel ... told me of the original experiments of Daguerre. My Parisian friends obtained for me the best examples of his results and the plates sent to me in Oxford were certainly the first examples of the sun's drawings that were ever seen in Oxford and, I believe, the first sent to England. Wholly careless at that time of finished detail, I saw nothing in the daguerreotype to help or alarm me; and enquired no more concerning it.**

Examined closely, it is difficult to accept at face value what Ruskin says in that passage. Ruskin refers to 'my last days at Oxford,' which indicates a date of 1841. If Ruskin was not mistaken in his recollection (he was approaching old age when he wrote his autobiographical account and his mind had been clouded with bouts of madness) then his assumption that he had obtained 'the first [daguerreotypes] sent to England' was plainly wrong. As early as September 1839 — just three months after the announcement of the daguerreotype process in Paris — the pioneer photographic portraitist Antoine Claudet imported daguerreotypes from France which he submitted to Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. Afterwards, in March 1840, the daguerreotypes were exhibited at the Royal Society, then sold from Claudet's shop in High Holborn. Advertisements for these appeared in the *Athenaeum*, the journal whose criticism of Turner in 1844 was to lead to Ruskin writing the first volume of *Modern Painters*.

Whatever the actual date of Ruskin's first contact with daguerreotypes, his interest in the process and its potential significance did not strike him until 1845 when he was in Venice. There, Ruskin wrote in *Praeterita*, he found

> **a French artist producing exquisitely bright small plates which contained, under a lens, the Grand Canal or St. Mark's Palace as if a magician had reduced the reality to be carried away into an enchanted land. The little gems of pictures costs a Napoleon each; but with 200 francs I bought the Grand Canal from the Salute to the Rialto; and packed it away in thoughtless triumph. I had no time then to think of the new power, or its meanings, my days were overweighted already.**

'Overweighted' though his days may have been — Ruskin was in Italy to acquire a knowledge of religious figurative painting in preparation for the second volume of *Modern Painters* — his *Praeterita* account, either deliberately or through loss of memory, diminishes his original enthusiastic reaction to those highly detailed, mirror-like images of Venice. His letters written at the time almost burst with the excitement of a revelation: for instance, that quoted at the beginning of this article and another written to his father, eight days later on 15 October 1845, in which he asserted that 'among all the mechanical poison that this terrible 19th century had poured upon men it has given us at any rate one antidote — the daguerreotype. It's a most blessed invention, that's what it is.'

Within a year Ruskin had acquired his own daguerreotype outfit and taken it with him on a tour through France, Italy and Switzerland, made in the company of his parents. It was not Ruskin who took the daguerreotypes — that task was left to his young

valet and amanuensis, 'George' Hobbs. George, so-called because his real Christian name, John, was just one too many in the Ruskins' household, was the first in a long line of secretaries and assistants. He entered Ruskin's service in 1841, at the age of seventeen. Ruskin recalled him indefatigably carrying the 'little' daguerreotype box (hardly 'little' with its silvered copper plates, bottles of mercury and other solutions, but then Ruskin did not have to carry it) up the mountains and taking the first daguerreotype of the Matterhorn in 1849. In common with most painters who took to photography (D.O. Hill, Rossetti, Delacroix and Millais are but a few examples), Ruskin assumed the role of director, leaving the complicated and messy technical and chemical manipulations to his assistant. Only rarely were Ruskin's photographs 'made by my own setting of the camera,' as he quaintly described it.

By August 1846 Ruskin was becoming aware of the differences between his own precise drawings and the daguerreotypes he had begun to make. 'My drawings are truth,' he wrote in a letter to W.H. Harrison, 'too literal perhaps: so says my father, so says not the daguerreotype, for it beats me grievously. I have allied myself with it: sith it mey no better be, and have brought away some precious records from Florence. It is certainly the most marvelous invention of the century, given us, I think, just in time to save some evidence from the great public of wreckers. As regards art, I wish it had never been discovered, it will make the eye too fastidious to accept mere handling.'

Ruskin's reference to saving 'some evidence from the great public of wreckers' reveals his concern for the state of many great architectural masterpieces. All over Europe he saw irreplaceable buildings crumbling away through neglect or being vandalised by unsympathetic or unskilled restorers. There was a limit to what he could do to record these buildings by drawing: firstly, such drawings were insufficiently detailed; secondly, given the immensity and urgency of the task, drawing took far too long. Photography appeared to provide an ideal solution. 'The greatest service which can at present be rendered to architecture,' he wrote in his preface to the second edition of *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*,

is the careful delineation . . . by means of photography. I would particularly desire to direct the attention of amateur photographers to this task: earnestly requiring them to bear in mind that while a photograph of landscape is merely an amusing toy, one of early architecture is a precious historical document; and that this architecture should be taken, not merely when it presents itself under picturesque general forms, but stone by stone, and sculpture by sculpture; seizing every opportunity afforded by scaffolding to approach it closely and putting the camera in any position that will command the sculpture wholly without regard to the resultant distortions of the vertical lines: such distortion cas always be allowed for once the details are completely obtained.

It was in *The Seven Lamps* that Ruskin first used daguerreotypes, 'taken under my supervision,' for his illustrations. When he was in Venice during the Winter and Spring periods of 1849/50 and 1851/2 he made and commissioned daguerreotypes and, for the first time, calotypes which he intended to publish in companion folios to *The Stones of Venice*. When the first volume of that work appeared in 1851 it was accompanied by the first of these folios, entitled *Examples of the Architecture of Venice*. 'I have used the help of the daguerreotype without scruple in completing many of the mezzotinted subjects,' Ruskin confessed, 'and I much regret that artists in general do not think it worth their while to perpetuate some of the beautiful effects which the daguerreotype alone can seize.'

Ruskin intended to publish twelve folios, but the series was abandoned after the third part without any illustrations based on calotypes appearing at all. Nevertheless, Ruskin remained interested in the idea of a photographic record of Venice. The city was under Austrian domination and Ruskin was concerned that it might be seriously damaged in any conflict between the Italians and the Austrians. In 1859 he was chairman at a meeting of the short-lived Architectural Photographic Association when G.E. Street, one of the leading architects of the Gothic

revival, gave a lecture on Venetian architecture, using his own photographs as illustrations. Afterwards, Ruskin spoke at length, expressing his appreciation of the photographs. He believed that it was not possible to tell what a building was like from an artist's representation. He supposed that artists lost their heads, as others lost their hearts, for he had seen a great deal more illusory painting by his own favourite, Turner, than by anybody else; and therefore if Venice was to be preserved they should look mainly to the aid of the photographer's art.

Ruskin's belief in the value of the photographic architectural record was his only consistent attitude towards photography. Over the next thirty years while he was changing his mind about the virtues of the 'sun stains,' as he later termed photographs, he was continually dispatching assistants to purchase, commission or take photographs and make sketches of all the buildings he considered precious and vulnerable. From Rouen in 1867, William Ward sent him drawings and large photographs of old houses that had recently been demolished. 'The drawings are all safe and very beautiful they are,' Ruskin wrote to him, ' and the photographs of great value to me.' Also at Rouen in 1880 Arthur Burgess, an engraver, had scaffolding erected in order that photographs of the West Front of the Cathedral could be taken for him.

Ruskin himself was at Venice in 1871 directing the work of photographers, artists and sculptors, collecting examples for his St. George's Museum at Sheffield. This was his opportunity to realise his ambition of an extensive photographic record of the city, documenting it almost literally stone by stone. In the St. George's collections are photographs showing the major palaces and churches of Venice, details of columns and mouldings, sculpture and mosaic, as well as charming studies taken of the less ostentatious little streets and waterways.

His most extensive use of architectural photographs as illustration was in *The Bible of Amiens*, published in parts between 1880 and 1885. This was part of a series, never completed, about Christian history and architecture associated with various centres. In an appendix to the work Ruskin explained that 'the quatrefoils on the foundation of the West front of Amiens Cathedral ... had never been engraved or photographed in any form accessible to the public until last year [1880] when I commissioned M. Kaltenbacher, 6 Passage du Commerce, who had photographed them for M. Viollet le Duc, to obtain negatives of the entire series ... The proofs are entirely satisfactory to me and extremely honourable to M. Kaltenbacher's skill.' Ruskin went on to state that he 'directed their setting so that the entire succession of the quatrefoils might be included in 18 plates; the front and two sides of the pedestal raise their number to 21, the whole, unmounted, sold by my agent, Mr. Ward (the negatives bring my own property) for four guineas, or separately each 5/-.'

Set against his methodical, practical (and, indeed, commercial) application of photography is Ruskin's evolution of attitude towards the medium. It is clear that in the 1840s and early 1850s he embraced photography enthusiastically and, to a large extent, uncritically. He recognised that he would have to consider its significance for human perception and its effect on art but at that period there were simply too many other pressures on his time. He admitted as much in a footnote to a reference to photography in the second volume of *The Stones of Venice:*

> **I intended to have given a sketch in this place of the probable results of the daguerreotype and calotype within the next few years in modifying the application of the engraver's art, but I have not had time to complete the experiments necessary to enable me to speak with certainty. Of one thing, however, I have little doubt, that an infinite service will soon be done to a large body of our engravers, namely, the making them draughtsmen (in black and white) on paper instead of steel.**

His initial reactions to photography were immensely favourable and concentrated largely on its almost magical ability to capture a scene in sharp detail. For Ruskin clarity of sight was paramount

through the eye it was possible to develop an understanding of the God-given intricacy of Nature. In his philosophy of art, as expressed in *Modern Painters*, it was important for the painter to remain faithful to the eye's vision. This did not mean that every detail should be slavishly put down on canvas: Ruskin realised that as the eye looked at a scene it changed its plane of focus so that at any one moment a proportion of the scene was indistinct. Also distance diminished observable detail although — and this was Ruskin's important point — the detail was still there, beyond our ability to perceive it. Thus it was equally false for a painter to represent distant or minute detail as an undifferentiated blob or blur as it would be to draw it with every delicate nuance of detail.

Ruskin developed this theme in the fourth volume of *Modern Painters* where he expressed what he considered to be a philosophical truth so important that he set it out in capital letters: 'WE NEVER SEE ANYTHING CLEARLY.' There was, he conceived, a universal law of obscurity which great painters, such as Turner, always observe. He painted natural objects so that they were full of mystery and suggested more than could actually be seen. To point up the correctness of this approach Ruskin drew a parallel with photography.

> **Photographs never look entirely clear and sharp; but because clearness is supposed to be a merit in them they are usually taken very clearly marked and un-Turnerian subjects, and such results as are misty and faint, though often precisely those which contain the most subtle renderings of nature, are thrown away and the clear ones only are preserved. Those clear ones depend for much of their force on the faults of the process. Photography either exaggerates shadows or loses details in the lights and in many ways . . . misses certain of the utmost subtleties of natural *effect* (which are often the things that Turner has chiefly aimed at) while it renders subtleties of *form* which no human hand could achieve. But a delicately taken photograph of a truly Turnerian subject is far more like Turner in the drawing than it is to the work of any other artist; though in the system of chiaroscuro, being entirely and necessarily Rembrandtesque, the subtle mystery of the touch . . . is not usually perceived.**

In that passage, written in 1856, it is plain that Ruskin's evaluation of photography had strayed far from his initial delighted approbation. He had become critical of what he regarded as photography's reproductive deficiencies — in essence the blocked-up shadows and bleached highlights characteristic of its limited tonal scale. Throughout *Modern Painters* the doctrine of fidelity to observed reality is held aloft as a guiding moral principle. Thus it was inevitable that photography, then at an early stage of its technical evolution, would ultimately fail to live up to Ruskin's high expectations. In *Modern Painters* he compared a rapid sketch he had made of the Towers of Friborg with a daguerreotype. He admitted that the daguerreotype with its details properly painted would be the grander of the two. 'But,' he argued, 'the sketch nevertheless conveys .. a truer idea of Friborg ... For instance, the wall going up behind the main tower is seen in my drawing to bend very distinctly ... In the daguerreotype the bend is hardly perceptible ... so that the sketch expressing this has a certain veracity wanting in the daguerreotype.'

In other works from 1857 onwards Ruskin elaborated this 'inadequate objectivity' argument againt photography. In *The Elements of Drawing* he drew attention to the effect known to photographers as halation. 'Brightness of sky will dazzle and perplex your sight,' he warned. 'This brightness causes, I believe, some loss of outline itself — at least the chemical action of the light in a photograph extends much within the edges of the leaves and, as it were, eats them away so that no tree extremity ... nor any other form coming against bright sky is truly drawn in a photograph.' Part of that problem was caused by the fact that early photographic processes were sensitive only to the blue and ultra-violet regions of the spectrum. Thus the sky, already the brightest part of a landscape, was reproduced as white whilst other colours appeared much darker than they were to the eye. In particular, Ruskin complained that glowing and warm shadows became too

dark. It was not until the mid-1870s that the spectral sensitivity of photographic plates was extended by the technique of dye sensitisation, but by that time Ruskin had ceased to give the medium proper consideration.

These technical criticisms were based on an accurate evaluation of photographic representation as might be expected from a man whose life had been devoted to the process of looking. But Ruskin's other attitudes toward photography were rooted in his feelings towards art and the immense changes taking place in society.

One of his earliest responses to the daguerreotype had been 'As regards art, I wish it had never been discovered, it will make the eye too fastidious to accept mere handling.' This is capable of a number on interpretations. The photograph was a 'literal' transcript of reality, more 'truthful' than Ruskin's own drawings and thus to be preferred. (Later he was to deride the public for preferring photographs to drawings.) At the same time the photograph set a new standard by which draughtmanship could be judged; a target to aim for so that the eye could be satisfied. In those interpretations there was a threat as well as a potential benefit to art. Initially Ruskin chose to concentrate on photography's beneficial aspects, advocating its use as a reference by artists, even as a stimulation to the imagination: 'I much regret that artists in general do not think it worth their while to perpetuate some of the beautiful effects which the daguerreotype alone can seize.'

This advice was given in 1851: in the same year Ruskin suggested in *Pre-Raphaelitism* that 'If the Pre-Raphaelites adhere to their principles and paint nature as it is around them, with the help of modern science ... they will ... found a new and noble school in England.' It did not need much interpretative imagination to see that 'modern science' in that context meant photography.

Yet two years later in his Edinburgh lecture on the Pre-Raphaelites he was at pains to refute the notion that they worked from photographs.

> **When . . . it began to be forced upon men's unwilling belief that the style of the Pre-Raphaelites was true and was according to nature, the last forgery invented respecting them is that they copy photographs. You observe how completely this last piece of malice defeats the rest. It admits they are true to nature, though only that it may deprive them of all merit of being so. But it may itself be at once refuted by the bold challenge to their opponents to produce a Pre-Raphaelite picture, or anything like one, by themselves copying a photograph . . . Pre-Raphaelitism has but one principle, that of absolute uncompromising truth in all that it does, obtained by working everything, down to the most minute detail from nature and from nature only.**

Why this change in attitude to the use of photography by the artist when he had been so enthusiastic before? As always with Ruskin there is no simple answer; rather there is a combination of several factors which came increasingly to influence his attitude as he grew older. The Pre-Raphaelites acknowledged the inspiration of his 'rejecting nothing, selecting nothing, scorning nothing' approach to Nature. Ruskin had intimate knowledge of their painstaking method of painting: Millais had been working on his portrait during the fateful holiday at Glenfinlas while Ruskin prepared his Edinburgh lectures. To compare a Pre-Raphaelite painting with a photograph meant placing a work of art, the result of vision and laborious toil, on the same level as a picture made by a mechanical and chemical process. For Ruskin, art could not be produced mechanically. This was a theme he touched on in his lecture on 'Light,' given as part of his inaugural series as Slade Professor of Art at Oxford in 1870.

'You might easily suppose,' he told his audience,

> **that the facility of obtaining photographs ... superseded the necessity of study and the use of sketching. Let me assure you, once for all, that photographs supersede no single quality nor use of fine art, and have so much in common with Nature that they even share her temper of parsimony, and will themselves give you nothing val-**

> **uable that you do not work for. They supersede no good art for the definition of art is 'human labour regulated by human design' and this design, or evidence of active intellect in choice and arrangement, is the essential part of the work, which so long as you cannot perceive you perceive no art whatsoever; which when once you do perceive you will perceive also to be replaceable by no mechanism. But farther, photographs will give you nothing you do not work for. They are invaluable for records of some kinds of facts and for giving transcripts of drawings by great artists; but neither in the photographed scene, nor photographed drawing will you see any true good more than in the things themselves, until you have given the appointed price to your own attention and toil. And when once you have paid this price you will not care for photographs of landscape. They are not true, though they seem so. They are merely spoiled nature.**

It is this conviction that photographs were mechanical in origin, not the result of a human being using the medium to produce his own, individual view of a subject, that underlies many of Ruskin's later opinions. He loathed the effects that mechanisation and industrialisation were producing on the landscape and on society. Foul smoke writhed in serpentine coils across his beloved skies; evil-smelling sewage polluted the streams by which he used to wander as a child. In overcrowded cities the working classes toiled, were exploited, dehumanised, and often mutilated by machines. The steam engine, that much-vaunted symbol of power and progress was, to Ruskin, only fit to transport idle fools. 'Almost the whole system and hope of modern life,' he complained in his fourth lecture, 'are founded on the notion that you may substitute mechanism for skill, photograph for picture, cast iron for sculpture.'

In technological progress he saw a force which, if not halted, would destroy nature and ultimately the human spirit.

All his life he asserted that it was impossible to love art until you loved what art mirrored better; he came increasingly to feel that no-one else cared for nature or for art. The melancholy of this feeling comes across strongly in *The White Thorn Blossom*, Letter 5 of *Fors Clavigera:*

> **You think it a great triumph to make the sun draw brown landscapes for you. That was also a discovery and may some day be useful. But the sun had drawn landscapes before for you, not in brown but in green and blue and all imaginable colours, here in England. Not one of you ever looked at them then, not one of you cares for the loss of them now when you have shut the sun out with smoke, so that he can draw nothing more, except brown blots through a hole in a box.**

Yet at the very same time that he was decrying photography, he instituted the collection of four series of drawings and photographs for students at the Ruskin School of Drawing at Oxford to consult. Most of the photographs were of Italian art and architecture. Significantly, landscapes were absent.

For the rest of his life, Ruskin retained this duality of attitude, using photography practically yet regarding it with a suspicion and dislike which later grew into bitter reproof for a public who, he was convinced, preferred photographs to art.

Portrait photography was included in this distaste, as well as landscapes. This probably stems from the fact that he regarded photographs of himself invariably as unsuccessful and disappointing. 'They've been doing photographs of me again,' he moaned in a letter written in the early 1880s, 'and I am an orang-outang as usual, and am in despair. I thought with my beard I was beginning to be the least bit nice to look at. I would give up half my books for a new profile.'

Certainly, by comparison with the paintings of him by George Richmond, Millais and Herkomer, few photographers' attempts met with great success. Lewis Carroll and Frank Sutcliffe did little to advance their reputations when they came to photograph him.

Probably the best photograph of Ruskin, taken when he was seventy-seven and looking magnificently hirsute and sagacious, was made by Frederick Hollyer, a distinguished London portrait photographer and a remarkable copyist of paintings and sketches.

Julia Margaret Cameron is said to have attempted a portrait but if she did no prints have come to light. A letter from him to Mrs. Julia Cameron, written in February 1868, suggests that she may have asked him for a sitting. The letter shows Ruskin at his most arrogant. Obviously, the answer was no: perhaps the normally invincible Mrs. Cameron had at last met her match! It is a curious letter, difficult to understand and remarkable for Ruskin's apparent desire for a more visionary application of photography: rather like Turner and, in fact, not so far from Mrs. Cameron's style of work.

> **Fifteen years ago I knew everything that the photograph could and could *not* do — I have long ceased to take the slightest interest in it, my attention being wholly fixed upon the possibility of wresting *luminous* decomposition which literally *paints* with sunlight — no chemist has yet succeeded in doing this; — if they do, the results will be precious in their own way — (but I hope they exist).**

In that letter Ruskin admits to losing interest in photography. It is clear that Ruskin's later attitudes failed to take into account the technical evolution of the medium and the fact that many photographs had achieved technical and artistic mastery of it. Mention of such names as Roger Fenton, John Thomson, Julia Margaret Cameron and Nadar, all producing fine works at various times between 1850 and 1875, in different styles expressive of individual interests and points of view, show how Ruskin's concept of the possibilities of photography remained static. His mind had become closed where earlier it had been open to the concept that art was confined to no particular means of expression but that it came from the spirit and energy of an individual.

'All that men do ingenuously is art in one sense,' he had written in the second volume of *The Stones of Venice:*

> **For, strictly speaking, there is no such thing as 'fine ' or 'high' art. All art is a low and common thing and what we indeed respect is not art at all, but instinct or inspiration expressed by the help of art. For as a photograph is not a work of art though it requires certain delicate manipulations of paper and acid and subtle calculations of time, in order to bring out a good result; so, neither would a drawing *like* a photograph, made directly from nature, be a work of art, although it would imply many delicate manipulations of the pencil and subtle calculations of effects of colour and shade. It is no more art to manipulate a camel's hair pencil, than to manipulate a china tray and a glass vial. It is no more art to lay on colour deliberately than to use the cornea and retina for the reception of an image than to use a lens and a piece of silvered paper. But the moment that inner part of the man, or rather, that entire and only being of the man, of which cornea and retina, finger and hands, pencils and colours are all mere servants and instruments ... the moment this part of the man stands forth with its solemn 'Behold it is I', then the work becomes art indeed, perfect in honour, priceless in value, boundless in power.**

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The Same Difference: On Lesbian Representation

Martha Gever and Nathalie Magnan

We've taken as our topic lesbian representation, feminist politics, and psychoanalytic theory. These are not necessarily overlapping problems, but they are problems which resonate in the discussion we've had about our work and lives — long before we decided to do this collaboration. We are differently situated in the world: one of us a writer and the editor of a magazine on independent video and film; one of us a photographer and graduate student. We are two friends who have been writing and talking to each other, comparing ideas and asking questions.

This essay will not outline *a* theoretical position, *a* political practice, or *a* lesbian aesthetic. We will consider some moments in lesbian history, in feminist history, some questions posed for feminists by lesbians, and the politics of representation as framed within feminism and within theories of sexual difference.

We *are* different. Lesbians aren't a coherent type or one variant category of the straight norm. Nor do we represent lesbians.

Representation, however, is central to any public statement concerning lesbians. Stereotypes plague us, as does invisibility. An enormous rift exists between how we are portrayed and portray ourselves as deviant women in patriarchal, heterosexist societies, and how we function and represent ourselves within our own subculture. Not that these are independent social systems, nor are lesbian identities free from gender-based definitions and descriptions. This category, which is sexual, is also social, as any lesbian knows. Our caricatured personae and lives become the subject of voyeurism, displayed in order to be exorcised. We encounter hostility; we see lesbians pictured as vampires, witches, predatory beasts, sadists, murderers, lonely spinsters, and sexual conquests. These lesbian types function as pictorial codes and narrative agents; we rarely see anything else. While we won't discuss photography as a specific cultural form, what we have to say about feminist theory and lesbians has many implications for feminist photographic criticism and practices.

Of course, the social meanings attached to lesbians and representations of lesbians vary from place to place, from time to time, and our experiences differ immensely. But there can be no doubt that feminism, at least in North America and Western Europe, cannot marginalize lesbians.

The Lesbian Menace

In the midst of the period of social upheaval known as "the Sixties" — remembered by some of us as an important time of political education and by some of us as severely utopian — women's liberation reemerged as a political movement. At the same time, the label "lesbian" also assumed political currency. The dreaded term was invoked by anti-feminists to dismiss what they judged to be unfeminine ideas and political activities, challenging the privileges associated with maleness: lesbians were castrating bitches, aberrant women incapable of accepting their natural function as wives and mothers, or old maids who can't attract a man. The ignominy of lesbianism was powerful enough to put fear into those feminists who largely sought reforms within the existing social order. But the loosening mores of the period also inspired some bravery among lesbians and gay men: the 1969 Stonewall rebellion led to the formation of the gay liberation movement, allied to the civil rights movement, the

anti-Vietnam War movement, and the more radical segments of the women's liberation movement. Lesbians conscious of their oppression as women and as homosexual outlaws became active in both gay and women's liberation groups, though in many cases they found support in neither.

In the U.S., the story of the NOW/Lavender Menace controversy has become legend. In 1969 Rita Mae Brown charged NOW with homophobia. NOW founder Betty Friedan responded by denouncing those who insisted on bringing lesbian rights to the NOW platform, calling them the "lavender menace," and NOW proceeded to systematically purge its lesbian members. The effect of this strategy was not exactly what Friedan intended: a group called Radicalesbians formed and appeared at a major feminst conference in 1970 wearing Lavender Menace t-shirts. They seized — or, as one account reported, liberated — the microphone and read a manifesto titled "The Woman Identitifed Woman." Although the Lavender Menace numbered about 30, that document was reproduced and circulated widely; it introduced a program for lesbian feminism which deeply influenced the direction of the women's liberation movement, as well as the lives of many lesbians (Snitow, 1983; Koedt, 1973). The Radicalesbians didn't limit their political goals to obtaining civil rights, but advocated a complete commitment of women *to* women in order to overthrow patriarchy. And, as women who loved women, not men, lesbians were upheld as the prototypical revolutionary feminists:

> **As the source of self-hate and the lack of real self are rooted in our male-given identity, we must create a new sense of self. As long as we cling to the idea of "being a woman," we will sense some conflict with that incipient self, that sense of I, that sense of a whole person. It is very difficult to realize and accept that being "feminine" and being a whole person are irreconcilable.... It is the primacy of women relating to women, of women creating a new consciousness of and with each other, which is at the heart of women's liberation, and the basis for the cultural revolution (Koedt, 1973).**

Once lesbian feminism had been formulated, feminists had to come to terms with lesbians, and more lesbians became active feminists. But there has been tension ever since. Lesbian separatism — modelled on various nationalist movements, especially Black nationalism — was adopted by some as the practical alternative to patriarchy. Needless to say, straight women weren't welcome. Patronymics were abandoned and new spellings of "woman" and "women" were deployed. As a member of the Furies, a D.C.-based group, Rita Mae Brown advocated collective organization as the ideal lesbian, feminist, political, and personal form of social organization (Myron, 1975). Collectives sprung up, as did lesbian businesses, publications, music festivals, and artistic communities. Portraits of lesbians began to circulate, as affirmative actions by and for real, live lesbians. Whether imagined strategically or romantically, women's culture and women's communities were proposed as possible here and now.

The obvious opposite of woman-identified is male-identified, and this epithet entered the lesbian feminist vocabulary. Traditionally, however, many lesbians had either rejected or embraced feminine identity; the lesbian subculture was populated by butches and femmes. But lesbian feminist definitions of lesbianism proclaimed such roles as male-identified. In a 1971 essay, Anne Koedt, author of the influential article "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm," wrote, "*All role playing is sick*, be it 'simulated' or 'authentic' according to society's terms" (Koedt, 1973). On the front line of the attack on gender roles, lesbian feminists should be neither butch nor femme, but something else.

We admit that this chronology is somewhat simplistic. What should be emphasized is that radical feminist and lesbian feminist analyses of sexual politics have irreversibly altered concepts of social behavior and of sexuality. Coming out after 1970 was made less difficult, less painful due to the gay and women's liberation movements. We no longer must accept our sexual desires as pathological. But, as many of us have learned, sexual politics and gender

identity are extremely complex constructs that resist simple corrective measures. In the cultural realm, for instance, replacing sexist stereotypes with "positive images" or admitting more women artists to the art world has left most sectors of patriarchal and capitalist ideology untouched. We are not prepared to indict the Radicalesbians, lesbian separatists, and other "women identified women" as insidious reactionaries, as some have proposed in recent years. However, we do not accept political analyses based on idealized female identity as theoretically sound or sufficient explanations of sexual differences.

Vocabulary

The notion of sexuality as we understand it today is fairly recent. It was constructed by male scientists such as Charcot, Freud, Ellis, Krafft-Ebing, and Hirschfield (Fergusson, 1981) at the end of the last century. As suggested by Foucault, the rules of the game between power and pleasure had changed (Foucault, 1978), and the concept of perversion became established. This new consciousness generated a norm with its opposite, a difference. When the medical discourse normalized difference, modern homosexuality became possible. Lesbians encode their own social position verbally, visually, and gesturally. Thus, there are two realities, medical and lesbian, that barely coincide. Some recognizable signs are shared, but an opposition exists between the hegemonic and the perverse, the dominant and the deviant within a shared social territory.

Naming is not neutral: it establishes categories, a hierarchy, a place for the lesbian within the social order. Names carry moral judgements. In the medical definition of the word "lesbian" the *inversion* of desire is central. (Around the turn of the century, lesbians were actually called "inverts.") This should be seen as one attempt by the medical institution to control what has obviously escaped them. Science defines lesbian desire in terms of pathological deviation.

The notion of perversion leads to the term "queer," defined by Webster as:

> **differing from what is usual, ordinary, odd, singular, strange, slightly ill, giddy, doubtful, suspicious. Having mental quirks, eccentric, not genuine, counterfeit, [and, at last] homosexual.**

This terminology applied to homosexuality relegates the term "queer" to negativity, as opposed to normality. In this relationship, the counterfeit Other only reinforces. But gay men and lesbians sometimes manage to construct subcultures that present a resistance to neat notions of normality instead of accepting the negativity of deviance.

The second type of words applied to gay women are exotic — "lesbian" and "sapphic." Lesbians come from Lesbos, Sappho's island, situated in faraway Greece. This reference encourages multiple geo-historical projections. The exotic names connote antique times, enormous distances, and long-past utopias. Some lesbians even attempt to bridge this distance. As an adjective, "sapphic" is one attribute among others, referring both to the exotic and the aesthetic. Since Sappho was an acclaimed poet, "sapphic" often connotes a soft version of lesbianism. A light marking of sexual preference becomes a sign of good taste.

These meanings bring the "lesbian" into an abstract, romantic territory — as a poetic artifact — which saves the word "lesbian" from total social damnation. It is hardly coincidental that lesbians resurface in the literature of Romanticism and the attendant interest in Orientalism, most notably in Baudelaire and Courbet. The words "sapphic" and "lesbian" reappeared in the middle of the nineteenth century after four centuries of oblivion, replacing the mechanical words "fricatrices" and "tribades" (both share the common derivation meaning to rub). This exoticism, with its suggestion of artiness, still haunts concepts of lesbianism. Is this the reason why "lesbian" is used by some as the least offensive of our names?

In the English-speaking world in the latter decades of the twentieth century "lesbian" is the word that most lesbians have to take on in order to name their social/sexual position. This word appears

and becomes meaningful in the lesbian's self-referential vocabulary during the coming-out process. In other words, the identity of a woman who loves women parallels a linguistic history from deviant to lesbian, from shame to affirmation to proclamation, in that order and all at once.

Another exotic but more aggressive name regularly associated with "lesbian" is "amazon." Monique Wittig and Sande Zeig provide a fictitious origin to this term in their splendid dictionary, *Lesbian Peoples:*

> **Amazon: In the beginning, if there ever was such a time, all the companion lovers called themselves Amazons . . . Then with the settlement of the first cities, many companion lovers disrupted the original harmony and called themselves mothers. Thereafter, amazon meant for them daughter, eternal child, she who does not assume her destiny. Amazons were banished from the cities of mothers.**

In lesbian subcultures, historical references have value since they construct a historical destiny (A. Rich, 1980; Fergusson, 1981). Wittig and Zeig, though, contest and thus destabilize "lesbian" as a concept. More conventional efforts have been made towards an empirical historical account of lesbianism, such as Lillian Faderman's book, *Surpassing the Love of Men*. However, the practice of systematic erasure of lesbian texts and images guarantees immense gaps in the reconstruction of any heritage while abetting the inflation of mythic key moments like the revival of goddess cults. On the other hand, establishing a valid historical past can allow the projections of a continuous and homogenous social and personal identity.

But language depends on who speaks. This is exemplified by varying uses of the word "dyke." In the *Roget's Thesaurus* we have "dyke" or "bull dyke," both of which are derogatory. But in *Lesbian Peoples* the connotations are more subtly established:

> **If you're poor/ then you're a dyke/ if you're rich/ you're sapphic// but if you're neither one, or the other/ a lesbian a lesbian is what you'll have to be// if you're strong/ then you're a dyke and if you're weak/ you're sapphic// but if you're neither one or the other// a lesbian, a lesbian is what you'll have to be.**

Clearly, the language depicting lesbians is never objective or stable.

Nor within lesbian subcultures are voices united. Differentiation within "lesbianisms" might subvert the notion of perversion. Heterogeneity should be acknowledged. We do not have to understand our sexuality within the boundaries marked by medical or legal or religious institutions. While these institutions control the social order, our sexuality cannot be regulated.

Words alone don't describe the cultural boundaries experienced and to some degree maintained by lesbians. One way of neutralizing the supposedly dangerous deviation from the heterosexual ideal is representing lesbians as heterosexual mimics, which is reminiscent of the old strategy of inversion. Perhaps assigning a familiar gender position calms the anxieties provoked by physical similarity in sexual relationships. Isn't the anxiety of "no man" based on the failure of biology to explain the lesbian attraction? Biology legislates sexual difference by the naturalness and the unnaturalness of roles and sexual preference.

Clothing is a metaphor for gender identity. Traditionally, trousers and masculinity — as in the question, "Who wears the pants?" — were synonymous. But since the sixties, Western dress has become more and more unisex. In a bourgeois society that marginalizes feminist demands, one possibility for public rebellion is what one can buy: the costume. Mode of dress has been a contested tactic in sexual politics, as with the androgynous "new woman" who appears at the turn of the century (Smith-Rosenberg, 1985). In the 1950s, a sign of resistance to the reconfirmation of the heterosexual ideology — a resistance that based itself on the memories of WWII where women's primary social identity was not based only on reproduction but also on production — was the act of wearing pants. Does the androgynous fashion of the early 1980s signify the integration of feminism

into the normative social order? In symbolic terms, the equal rights movement was redefined by some as a right to wear men's clothes, but it is noteworthy that androgynous fashion always tends toward male dress conventions. This is hardly surprising, since clothes often imply power, or at least the *appearance* of power.

So butch dress became socially acceptable. Yet with "real" butch the body is present, the play is for real. In sexual relationships the power is encoded through clothing. Blatant cross-dressing as a social phenomenon appeared in Western society around the turn of the century. Thus, the "manish lesbian" surfaced when lesbianism was medically declared deviant. Rich women were able to be flamboyant — some members of Natalie Barney's circle in Paris for example — without having their existence endangered by their erotic choice. And again in the 1950s, the only recognized lesbian was the mannish one. Socially, there are few representations of the "femme" part of the story. Although many feminists declared butch-femme roles regressive, the late 1970s saw the arrival of outrageous and organized S&M lesbians who celebrated overt power.

Some of us might want to consider a sexuality not defined by the dichotomy male/female. Some of us might want to consider a sexuality that could take into account a constant negotiation for power. This understanding of sexuality subverts systematic encoding.

It is different.

The Same Difference

We've leapt from gender and sexual politics to gender and social codes — especially language — and its correlate, silence. We've tried to disturb the silence, to introduce women who contradict neat gender and sexual dichotomies. Here we meet up with psychoanalytic theory, as employed to explain the different positions of male and female subjects within patriarchy and to explain sexuality in representation. This direction is not arbitrary; we're talking about feminist cultural and theoretical strategies that renounce much feminist art and the surrounding feminist theories prevalent in the early and mid-'70s: the articulation of female identity, feminine sensibility, woman-identified imagery.

A woman's discovering or revealing her natural, biologically-based identity — her feminine essence — has been called essentialist. Those feminists who took this route, it's been said, fell into a trap laid by patriarchal ideology, which naturalizes sexual difference rather than analyzing difference as a function of representational systems. To a degree, this evaluation is apt if applied to work with specific feminine iconography: Judy Chicago's or Tee Corinne's cunt/flowers, Barbara Hammer's women-as/in-nature movies, or Mary Beth Edelson's shamanistic photo cycles, for example. Still, much feminist culture of the past decade — including literature, music, and performance as well as visual art, film, and video — asserts varieties of female experience rather than feminine nature. These efforts have also been faulted because, according to feminist psychoanalytic thought, difference isn't represented; it abides in representation itself. Thus the need for a "politics of representation."

Also suspect in art circles is much feminist historical research and writing as well as sociological studies about women (Rich, 1983). According to Kate Linker, writing on "Representation and Sexuality,"

> **...equal rights or gender equity strategies... based in the elimination of discrimination and in equal access to institutional power, in no way attempt to account for the ideological structures of which discrimination is but a symptom.... They leave untouched the integrated value system (of patriarchal ideology) through which feminine oppression is enacted. And it is with the aim of understanding the construction of sexed subjectivity so as to disarm the positioning of the phallocentric order that artists have turned to psychoanalysis (Linker, 1983).**

Which artists? Well, certainly those Linker included in the exhibit "Difference: On Representation and

Sexuality" at the New Museum (Winter 1985) among them Mary Kelly, Barbara Kruger, Sherrie Levine, Judith Barry, Victor Burgin, Max Almy, Dara Birnbaum, Sylvia Kolbowski. Representation here was framed as reproduction — of ideology and images. Two notable sexual differences not represented were female and male homosexuality. This absence, of course, is not exceptional: in the proliferating texts on psychoanalysis and feminism, difference is decidedly singular — masculine or feminine — the same difference.

Keeping in mind that the foundations of psychoanalytic critiques of representation are derived from Freud, who theorized lesbians as women who reject femininity, assuming masculine identification instead (Mitchell, 1984), and Lacan, who theorized lesbians as women who refuse to recognize castration (Mitchell, 1982), we encounter a theoretical crossroads. Should we interrogate what seems to be a theoretical inadequacy from inside or outside the theory? Can the "politics of the unconscious," in Peter Wollen's words (Bershen, 1985), be a feminist politics that admits lesbians? (After seeing Wollen and Laura Mulvey's videotape, *The Bad Sister*, we'd say no.) And what about politics? Can we ignore this interpretation of feminism, without which, it's said, we cannot understand our oppression, without which feminism — including feminist artistic practices — can only address symptoms?

Psychoanalytic descriptions of patriarchy — following from Lacan — propose sexual identity — masculine or feminine — as the primary social division. And this division forms the basis of a system of signification, including all representation, and language in particular. The central instance of differentiation — of division — which allows each subject's entry into the symbolic order which underlies society occurs when the child recognizes the mother's lack of a penis. One has one or one hasn't. This basic division determines sexual positioning and results directly from Freud's castration complex: one either risks castration or one is castrated.

Now, Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, the British feminist editors of Lacan's writings on feminine sexuality, agree that this division is not identical with anatomy — not a biological difference. But phallic lack is the characteristic of femininity; in other words, a negative position. Lacan said, "Woman does not exist." Mitchell writes, "...the girl will desire to have the phallus and the boy will struggle to represent it" (Mitchell, 1984). Mitchell takes care to point out that no individual actually has the phallus, since the phallus is a psychic construct. But various feminists, among them Mary Ann Doane, Teresa de Lauretis, and Jane Gallop, have problematized the confusion between phallus and penis. Strict Lacanian feminists assert that this is a confusion; no human individual really possesses the phallus; this is a masculine mystique, a masculine conceit (Mitchell, 1984). But this confusion isn't coincidental: the phallus wields power and so do men.

In the psychic economy described by Lacan and his followers, the unconscious is structured like a language. Desire resides in the unconscious; the unconscious is governed by repressions of key events associated with the subject's entry into the symbolic order — separation from the mother and the castration complex; the child's demand for love can never be satisfied; unsatisfied demand is desire; the phallus, which is missing, is the object of desire; the phallus is the measure of desire. All desire is masculine, while femininity is constructed on not having — absence, lack, negativity. Thus feminine identification is a masquerade, a mask shaped by masculine desire. Who looks? Who's looked at? Voyeurism is domination. This logic, then, positions the woman outside language, outside desire, outside the symbolic order, leading some concerned with the question of feminine sexuality and representations of women into the black hole that is femininity.

Artists and critics who take this direction have arrived at various conclusions about what artistic practice is required: counterlanguage (Kuhn, 1982), women assuming the phallus critically so as to erode its power; unmasking patriarchal structures supporting oppression (Linker, 1983); giving voice to the repressed maternal (Kelly, 1983; Kaplan, 1983); acknowledging feminine masquerade (Kolbowski, 1984); a radical heterosexuality, an other bisexuality (Gallop, 1982). The feminist cultural project, then, becomes aligned with elaborations of feminine sexuality. That's what's meant by the "poli-

tics of the unconscious."

The contradiction in the psychoanalytic explanation of sexual difference that assigns woman to a purely negative position is, as Mary Ann Doane put it, that "She *can* speak." What we need, she writes, are "theories which attempt to define or construct a feminine specificity (not essence)... which work to provide woman with an autonomous symbolic representation" (Doane, 1981). But even though natural femininity has been debunked and the hopelessness of making representations of women has been challenged, in this system feminism remains tied to femininity. Heterosexual difference remains the only sexual difference — and the basis for all social difference. To quote Jacqueline Rose paraphrasing Lacan: "...individuals must line up according to an opposition (having or not having the phallus)" (Mitchell, 1982).

As we said, we will not leave the authority of Lacanian psychoanalytic theories on sexual difference unquestioned. Here we will cite Monique Wittig's provocative and pertinant essay, "The Straight Mind."

> **The discourses which particularly oppress all of us, lesbians, women, and homosexual men, are those discourses which take for granted that what founds society, any society, is heterosexuality. These discourses speak about us and claim to say the truth in an apolitical field ... as if, in what concerns us, politically insignificant signs could exist ... The concept of difference has nothing ontological about it. It is only the way that the masters interpret a historical situation of domination. The function of difference is to mask at every level the conflicts of interest, including ideological ones (Wittig, 1980).**

For all dominated peoples—the Others, the different ones—an analysis of power that is experienced economically, politically, as well as psychologically, must be incorporated in any analysis of social relations. For women, lesbians, and homosexual men, difference is not a neutral concept. Can we overcome psychological oppression and exploitation without confronting institutionalized power — for instance, the institution of psychological "treatment"? Is ideology generated by inherent, ahistorical, immutable psychic processes alone? If so, in the Lacanian scheme, patriarchy cannot be subverted, deconstructed, or in any way undone. The phallus remains primal and primary. Patriarchy, as defined within Lacanian theory, is monolithic, unchanging from culture to culture, without a history. This ignores women acting as historical subjects, as participants in social struggles.

What political action can be taken to realize a politics of the unconscious? Can this attempt to bring art into feminist political struggle avoid replicating the fate of earlier avant-garde art movements? Will these representational strategies, too, become subversive moves divorced from political discourse, eventually subsumed by dominant art discourse? Do ruptures in the symbolic order—deconstruction of media images, for instance—disrupt mechanisms of power? Is simply unhinging gender positions, bisexuality, the most radical goal for feminist artists? For feminism?

Lacanian theory or a practice based on this theory cannot account for lesbian sexuality outside femininity, but lesbian experience tells otherwise. Lesbian experience and lesbian critiques of heterosexuality, along with critiques of heterosexual categories, troubles the essence of femininity far more than bisexuality can. Throughout psychoanalytic literature, the basic question recurs: "What does woman want?" Wittig comments:

> **What is woman? Panic, general alarm for an active defense. Frankly, it is a problem that the lesbians do not have, because of a change of perspective, and it would be incorrect to say that lesbians associate, make love, live with women, for "woman" has meaning only in heterosexual systems of thought and heterosexual economies. Lesbians are not women (Wittig, 1980).**

Lesbians find ourselves outside heterosexual systems, placed there by history and, sometimes, by choice. Yet, we should add, lesbians do not live

on an isolated island. We often mingle in the heterosexual world. Indeed, there is no escape. We rejoin women—we are women—when we participate on many fronts of feminist struggle. But in the particular struggle against the institution of heterosexuality— representations, ideology, and all—lesbians are not women.

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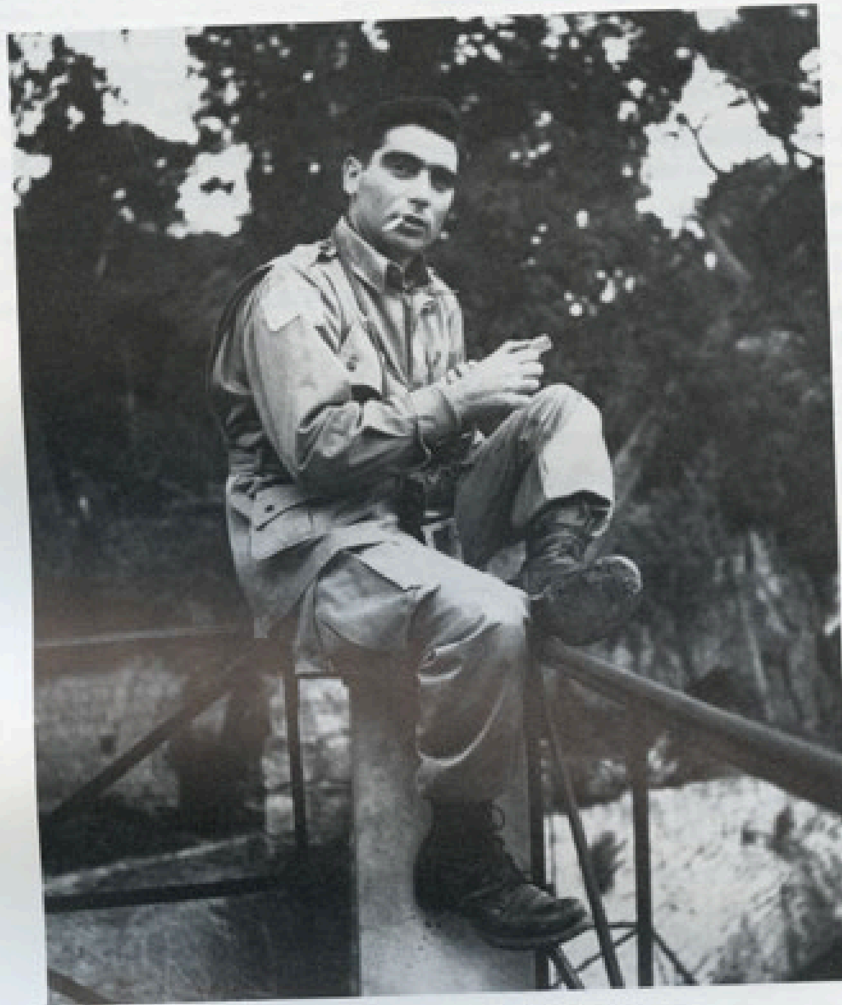
Essay-review

by Steve Cagan



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Robert Capa: A Biography
by Richard Whelan
Alfred A. Knopf, 1985

Robert Capa: Photographs
edited by Cornell Capa and Richard Whelan
Alfred A. Knopf, 1985

Why write a biography of a photographer? Of course, there are many motives: the possibility of increasing critical understanding of his or her work through developing our understanding of motivation, immediate context and background of specific work or the photographer's work in general; illuminating historical or critical issues which persist in the consideration of the photographer's work or period; or simply spinning a good yarn. Another possible motive for any biography — always suggested when the work is "authorized" — is the elevation of the subject to heroic stature. This is common in biog-

raphies of documentarians and photojournalists, and it represents a serious threat to a balanced understanding of their roles in modern society. In fact, heroic treatment can even interfere with our ability to judge a photographer's levels of success and failure on their own terms — their own motivations, and their ability to realize their own goals, can easily be lost in the mythic structure created by biographers.

Richard Whelan's biography of Robert Capa seems more than anything to be an exercise in such myth-making. Seeing the book in this light enables us to deal with one aspect of Whelan's treatment which has troubled many people: the Capa who emerges from Whelan's book has been seen as a nearly pathological liar. To be fair to both Whelan and Capa, I don't think that that is a fair description of the portrait Whelan draws; Capa is rather represented in the book as an unreliable witness to his own past, and someone who is willing to embellish and even distort the truth for sometimes less than honorable reasons, but not a pathological liar. We'll look at this issue in more detail below. He is also seen as a womanizer and a war addict who was unable to stand the boredom of peacetime and "normal" life. People who respond to these qualities in the Capa presented by Whelan (and, among others, they are inescapable) tend to see the book as an exercise in "debunking," a work which exposes the true nature of a man who created his own myth. And they wonder how the Capa family must feel about this work and their cooperation in its production.

I want to suggest that this is the wrong way to approach this biography. In the first place, it forces us to conclude that Whelan's evident admiration for Capa is forced or artificial, which is simply hard to accept. Further, it lets Whelan off the hook, allowing him to be seen as stripping away the myths created by Capa himself. While I think that perhaps he would like to believe that, in fact Whelan is engaged in creating a much more subtle, durable and, in the long run, destructive mythology. And even the apparently negative characteristics which he ascribes to Capa function in this myth-building, in at least two ways.

First, Whelan, by acknowledging these perhaps unsavory aspects of Capa's personality and yet brushing off their importance, can indirectly make a claim for Capa's true greatness — the treatment allows Capa to emerge as almost beyond criticism. Of course, we can point out this or that problem with his behavior, but are we going to allow that to interfere with our final judgement about Capa's greatness? That's the kind of approach which is only appropriate for someone who is being considered as a candidate for the Pantheon — we normal mortals are more accountable for our sins.

Second, and more important, what some might call flaws in Capa's character or behavior are treated by Whelan as consequences of his heroic dimensions and tasks. As we shall see, they underline his mythical stature by being seen as consequences (perhaps undesirable, but ultimately unavoidable) of the encounter between a true hero and a tainted world.

A heroic myth generally contains some fairly predictable elements — the birth of the hero, education through trial, acceptance of a task or mission, overcoming obstacles in the pursuit of the task (which may or may not be accomplished), death and apotheosis. The hero himself (much more rarely herself) shares in several equally predictable qualities — courage, generosity, strength, dedication, physical beauty (or at least attractiveness). Sometimes he is wise and/or knowledgable; and sometimes he is an innocent. These characteristics and aspects of personal history are not completely fixed, but they are generally part of the myth. Finally, a mythic hero is often surrounded by a mystic aura, somewhat impenetrable, making the specific outlines of their personality a little elusive. The chroniclers of the hero's life will attempt to accumulate details which describe the mythical figure to us, but in at least some cases, they will be unable to penetrate the final veil of mystery, and the mystery itself will form part of the heroic myth.

In Richard Whelan's biography of Robert Capa, that sense of an elusive quality is created, starting quite early, by the very unreliability of Capa as a witness. Whelan is forever giving us Capa's version of an anecdote and then explaining why it cannot be true, or is at least very unlikely. On other occasions Whelan simply accepts Capa's telling of

Robert Capa

Photographs

an incident. His criterion, I imagine, is support from the many interviews he conducted. Sometimes, and especially in the World War II stories, he is able to supply documentary evidence for his claim that Capa's version of an incident is erroneous. More often, there are simply some stories which Whelan tells us are false and others which, for no evident reason, he expects us to accept. The effect on me was not to create an image of Capa as an uncontrollable liar, but rather to seriously blur the edges of the whole story, and to make Capa the person very elusive and difficult to pin down. This is particularly true in the earlier sections of the book, up to the time that Capa bases his operations in New York in 1939. Far from being daunted by the vagueness of the description which results from this uncertainty, Whelan points out that along with the name Robert Capa, the man originally named Endre Friedmann also invented a persona which would in time overwhelm him, leaving Capa himself as well as us unsure of where the created Capa began and the "real" Friedmann left off. The most important aspects of Capa as a person and a photographer remain well outside our ken. In fact we learn very little in this biography about Capa's attitudes or ideas concerning his own work, or his sense of where he was going most of the time.

One of the most irritating distractions of this book is the disproportionate space given to some details and anecdotes while other more important issues get short shrift. This is very likely the result of the unevenness of verifiable information, but the result is that often what seems like rather trivial stories or details fairly leap off the page, and a general sense of unbalance is created. This problem extends to those many corrections Whelan makes in Capa's versions of stories. Sometimes he says, in a rather off-handed way, that nearly every detail in a tale told by Capa is untrue. At other times he presents detailed arguments to prove that Capa's memory of the exact day he arrived at a certain spot was fallacious. In short, there does not seem to be a strong sense of what is significant and what is unimportant, and that in turn reinforces the strong sense of unreality about the subject. This of course does not necessarily help to strengthen the mythic heroism of the subject.

The classic hero's call to adventure or quest is satisfied in this treatment by the young Friedmann's decision to pursue journalism, and by a life of what at times was undeniably heroic behavior in fulfilling that calling. In some ways, Capa provides the author with an almost too-easy subject, for his wanderings through Central Europe between the two world wars, in the company of numerous exiles, refugees and restless souls, really does have some of the qualities of the wandering hero-in-exile. Like the typical mythical hero, he is tested by his experiences — forced to leave his family in Budapest as a young political refugee, later trying to eke out a living as a penniless, though devoted, young photojournalist in Paris — and in typical fashion he is aided in overcoming obstacles through the lessons taught to him by guides — Lajos Kassák in his student days in Budapest, and György Kepes in his days of struggle in Paris.

But providing us with this kind of heroic framework does not begin to explain some of Capa's important directions. Thus, about the critical interest in Republican Spain, Whelan only tells us about Karl Korsch, the anti-Stalinist German Communist who

enthusiastically supported Spanish anarcho-syndicalism and to believe in the possibility of a democratic and independent Spain. Whelan says, "Whether [Capa] actually read Korsch's article, heard Korsch talk about Spain, or only heard Korsch's views second-hand, it was probably Korsch's ideas that planted the seed of what would within five years grow into his own passionate involvement with the struggles of the Spanish Republic." This is only one example of numerous "probablies" which Whelan puts forth in explaining — or rather, not explaining — the evolution of Capa's ideas, and the influences on him. If the evidence is just too thin, or missing, it would be reasonable simply to avoid trying to recreate the motivational structure, but Whelan seems unable to resist. The problem is especially obvious in a case like this — why offer a weak hypothesis for Capa's specific motivation when every liberal, democrat and leftist in the world supported Republican Spain?

Like the classical hero, Capa is portrayed as a figure of great sexual power, a "real man" who is irresistibly attractive to women. Unlike some classical heros, he does not spurn women's love or romantic involvement. He only rejects (again in the pattern of many mythic heros) the commitment which lesser mortals are expected to make. Capa's unwillingness to make commitments in several very intense relationships with women is explained — or explained away — largely as a consequence of the pain he bore as a result of the death of Gerda Taro, whom Whelan refers to several times as Capa's one real love. Looking at Capa not as a hero, but as a man, that explanation simply isn't adequate — Whelan himself points out that their relationship had cooled off considerably before her death in Spain, when Capa was still in his early twenties.

The other argument Whelan advances, that Capa was unwilling to commit himself because of the dangerous nature of his work, might have some credibility, but it is weakened by Whelan's own portrayal of Capa as a womanizer. In the mythic view, all can be understood — the heroic dimensions of Capa's love for Gerda makes all love dangerous to him, and his commitment to his mission makes commitment to any one woman impossible. It's too bad he wasn't celibate — but that would have been too perfect.

Of course, the hero must in due course have victories and achieve glory. This Capa does. He finds his niche as a war photographer, and travels in the company of other immortals in photography, journalism and other media as they meet at some of the great battles of our century. In case we miss the point, Whelan several times points out the greatness of Capa's work. One typical example, describing Capa's work in Italy in the 1944 campaigns: "A few hours later, entering the village of Radicosa with a patrol, he got enough good pictures to have made the climb worthwhile. The greatest shows a soldier bandaging the leg of an old shepherd..." Not "the best," or "a particularly good one," but "the greatest" (among the great, of course). I don't question Capa's claim to greatness; my problem is with a particular kind of hyperbole which, while it may be part of the structure of heroic myth, sometimes suggests an uneasiness on Whelan's part — especially since there are as many mentions of sub-standard, even uninteresting photographs as there are of "great" ones.

Another disturbing example of hyperbole is Whelan's description of a photograph of "Mussolini standing at his desk in his grand-ballroom-sized office...[which] devastatingly exposed the Italian dictator as a megalomaniac dwarfed by the deceptive sham of his ambitions." The photograph was revealing, biting, and seems to have been a good and resourceful response on Capa's part to the situation. But the assertion that any one photograph is a "devastating" exposé or critique of anything reveals an unrealistic expectation of what photography can do which is based, paradoxically enough, on an extremely low estimation of photography's true powers. If we thought a photograph could present a critique which actually "devastated" its subject, we would look for evidence of that effect — did Mussolini lose sway he had previously held over some people? any people? — as a result of that publication? Of course, the evidence would be somewhat elusive — but the fact that it isn't even sought suggests the hollowness of the claim. And in Whelan's case this claim — like the one a few pages earlier that Capa's manipulating a crowd at a rally to chant a meaning-

less slogan provided "a devastating critique of political sloganeering" — undermines his effectiveness. Using "devastating," or other such extreme characterizations where "insightful" or even "good" would be more appropriate does not so much elevate the subject's accomplishment as denigrate the real possibilities of the medium.

Finally, Capa dies a hero's death — killed by a land mine in Indochina, very shortly after arriving there in 1954. His apotheosis, as Whelan reports, came in the form of his recognition through the Robbert Capa Award of the Overseas Press Club, established only a year after his death, as well as in the work of Cornell Capa and others in the International Fund for Concerned Photography, which evolved into the ICP. And, as Whelan says, there is "an extraordinary body of work that showed not only the nature of war as it had never been shown before, but also a tremendous sympathy for individuals in all kinds of circumstances, and a legend that would long continue to inspire other photographers and to delight and sadden his friends."

What is wrong with this kind of heroic treatment of Robert Capa? Primarily two things. In the first place, it continues a very common and important tendency to distort the importance of photographers, particularly photojournalists, at the expense of our understanding of the ostensible subject of their work. I wouldn't want to push this argument too far — after all, the way photographers work is an interesting topic in its own right, and understanding the way photojournalists and documentarians approach their work may provide us with useful information for developing both critical theory and current practice. But neither would I minimize it. In a reproduction of the first page of the coverage of the Palestine War which appeared in the London *Illustrated* in June, 1948, we read: "Once again the violence of war has caught up with Robert Capa..." and at least on the first page he remains a prominent subject in an article which is supposed to be about a war he went to cover. This feels like a forerunner of the TV "news" person appearing as a major point of interest in every story they cover.

Moreover, this approach often goes to the extreme of treating the photographer in the heroic way I have described Whelan as doing, which in turn leads to the second problem — the writer is absolved by the very greatness of his subject from examining the serious critical and political questions which the photographer's story may raise. In the case of Capa, Whelan's book includes no serious examinations of any important issues of this kind, not even the obvious ones about the effects of the work as it was actually distributed.

Not only does Whelan fail to examine whether Capa's work helps the viewer understand "the reality of war," but he ignores such questions as whether (and how) it won support for the causes the photographer wished to support, or helped build the anti-war sentiment he claimed as a motive. We would be interested in whether, for example, being a member of a pack of journalists who were building their international careers on the wars they were covering influenced, however subtly, the work they produced. We would benefit from a discussion of the impact on Capa's work of an obsessive attraction to war. (From Whelan's account, Capa was never really able to adapt to peace and found daily-life stories in peace-time boring and uninspiring. The contrast to W. Eugene Smith, who apparently turned away from war photography over his disappointment that his work did not end war, suggests an area for serious investigation.)

I'm not suggesting that the consequences of the "war correspondent" role which Capa assumed are all inevitably negative; the problem is that the heroic treatment results in Whelan never seriously considering these questions.

Finally, this kind of treatment avoids any serious critical response to Capa's actual production — that is, to the articles in which his photographs appeared or to Capa's photography aside from the occasional reference to his greatness. Although there isn't the space here to open a critical discussion of Capa's work, I can point out that Whelan's book simply begs such questions as whether Capa really produced a large proportion of journalistically, aesthetically and socially satisfying photographs, or whether he produced a number of truly wonderful photographs among an output which was generally unexceptional. Was Capa's work really all that

unique, or was it his personal style and experience, rather than his photographic output, which distinguished him from other photographers? Again, I was disappointed that Whelan's book conveniently avoided these troublesome but important issues.

The heroic status accorded to Robert Capa requires him to slip the bonds of being a journalist of his time and be treated as an artist who treated "universal human truths." This particular theme, hinted at in the biography, is carried to fruition in the volume of his photographs entitled *Robert Capa: Photographs*.

In his Foreword to this book, his brother Cornell Capa says, "he never thought of his photographs as art." Richard Whelan writes, "Even after he had become recognized as one of the foremost photographers of the century, Capa used to tell his friends, 'I'm not a photographer, I'm a journalist.'" Undaunted by their own descriptions of Capa's (very reasonable) self-image, Cornell Capa and Whelan insist on presenting us with an art book. Whelan argues, "And yet it must be said that Capa was, after all, an artist — as is anyone who does his work with passion, intelligence, skill, sensitivity, grace, wit and force of character." (Some of my students will be glad to know that we've finally resolved *that* question.) Cornell Capa proposes that "Born...with a language not useful beyond the borders of a small country, Hungary, he managed to experience the world through a universal means of communication, photography. He was thus able to speak to us all, then and now."

Beyond the problems which emerge as soon as that notion of "universality" surfaces, we have to understand that Richard Whelan and Cornell Capa are undermining Robert Capa's own understanding of what he was doing in order to transform yet another photojournalist into an artist. They proceed to do so, much to the detriment of the original meaning and impact of the work.

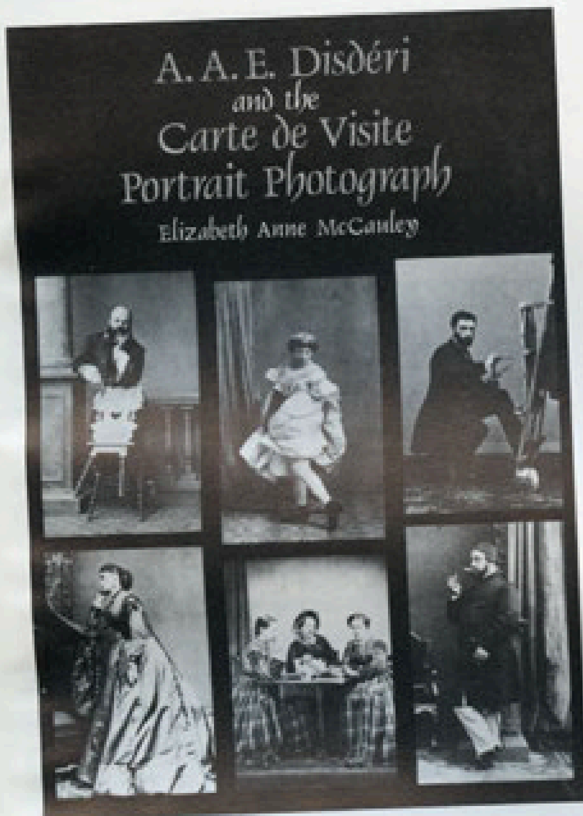
In the biography a number of pages from the magazines in which they orginally appeared are reproduced, instead of isolated prints. I would argue that *this* is Capa's work, his output. In fact, in his life he did *not* speak to the world through some kind of specious "universal visual language," but through journalism — photos and text, sometimes his own, in articles and books. It was in the publications after his death that he was made to speak about "War," rather than about the *particular* war he was covering. The process of decontextualizing his work helped to solidify his heroic status, but it did so at the cost of the kind of communication which was experienced by contemporaries when they read the articles and looked at Capa's photographs. We cannot totally reclaim the experiences of the past, but do we have to reject them quite so completely?

Ironically, one of the effects of this beautifully produced book is to raise once again the question of the consistency and uniqueness of Capa's work. In his section of *The Concerned Photographer* (Grossman, 1967), some of Capa's best-known (and best) individual images are black bordered, out of chronological order and virtually without context. I'm certainly happy to have those images, but they were presented to make the claim that Capa (like the other photographers in that collection) was a "universal" artist whose photographs transcended their contexts. And the editor of that book, Cornell Capa, chose the images of Robert Capa which most nearly succeed in that transcendence. Now, with the transcendence apparently assured, we are presented a book which is filled with images with, to be sure, a little more information, but still in the "art" mainstream. And in addition to the problems I've already mentioned, the inclusion of a much larger range of Robert Capa's work inherently gives us not only many "new" strong images, but also many others which look strikingly similar to the work of numerous of Capa's contemporaries — not only the already-canonized "greats," but also some of the anonymous photographers whose work appears in "historical," rather than "art" collections.

Robert Capa is certainly one of the important photographers of our century, and there are good reasons why he is so regularly included among the "greats." The problem is not with that judgement, but with the process of selecting "great photographers," of canonization, in the first place. While Whelan's biography does provide some useful information and insights into Capa, and while I certainly enjoy looking at the images presented in the new

volume, I think we need something more: a serious examination both of the way photography like Capa's functions, and of the image of the photographer-as-hero itself. I am convinced that such an examination would in the end not only be more useful, but would more directly honor Capa's intentions.

Book Reviews



A.A.E. Disderi and the Carte de Visite Portrait Photograph
by Elizabeth Anne McCauley
Yale University Press, 1985

No other class of photographs has been so consistently mentioned by art historians or so inadequately understood as the carte de visite portrait. By their sheer numbers and the ruggedness of their mounts, this least-praised of formats has out-survived other types of prints produced by nineteenth century studios. The fad for exchanging cartes became an international phenomenon and the competition for world markets for the first time brought the cost of portraiture within the reach of the masses. The full-length standing portraits with studio props which typified these cartes were so widely accepted that to later generations they have seemed like obvious and spontaneous solutions. Anne McCauley began her dissertation research at Yale not in photographic history but in the study of physiognomic theories of Second Empire painting in France. Early in her investigations she recognized in the insistent commentaries on the posing of sitters, which typified the contemporaneous texts on photography, a significant key to understanding the iconology of mid-nineteenth century portraiture. This awareness called into question the validity of the generally disparaging and often repeated biographical sketches of the inventor and leading exponent of the carte portrait, Andre Adolphe Eugene Disderi. The results of her quest have broad ramifications for the reinterpretation of many long-held presumptions about the history of the medium.

Disderi's life was known to previous writers primarily from Nadar's autobiography, which was not written until 1899. McCauley traces the disparaging opinions which colored the book to Disderi's failure to pay debts to Nadar's brother. The biographical documentation which has survived reveals many similarities in the careers of the two photographers. Disderi's cloth merchant father was twice bankrupt before his death in 1840, which left the twenty one year old Andre Adolphe to support his mother and five siblings. Before opening his first daguerreotype studio in Brest in about 1848, he had already struggled through several business ventures and begun his own family. After a brief period in Nimes he was able to acquire sufficient backing to open the largest photographic studio in Paris in 1854, the same year he patented the photographic carte de visite, but prosperity did not follow quickly. Nadar's often-repeated tale of how Disderi's fame and success were the result of a dramatic publicity stunt in 1859 by the Emperor Napoleon III, who stopped his troops in front of the photographer's studio to have his carte portrait taken, is exposed as inconsistent

Disdéri, uncut sheet of eight views of Henriette Schlosser, 1861.

with contemporary accounts. The Emperor's route neither passed near the studio nor was the late hour of his departure suitable for photographing. Disderi's aggressive pursuit of success is chronicled in his many patents and publications on photography. With three locations around Paris, branches in Madrid and London, and various other enterprises it might be presumed that he would have established a secure future, but like most large corporate studios he owed much to his backers and the costs of maintaining more than sixty two employees meant that minor fluctuations in public favor could be disastrous. By 1867 the carte de visite market was in crisis and the collapse of the French army in the Franco-Prussian war marked the end not only of the Second Empire but also of the boom in photography. Disderi declared bankruptcy in 1872, and again in 1875, and for the last decade of his life he ran studios in Nice, frequently changing addresses and dodging creditors such as Nadar's brother. His death in a charity hospital in Paris in 1889 provided Nadar with an ideal ending to his moralizing fable.

While the more accurate account of Disderi's life would be a significant contribution, it is the reevaluation of the traditional cliches about the carte de visite phenomenon that makes this publication so important. In place of the dramatic myth of Napoleon's fiat in having his portrait taken by Disderi, while his troops and the Parisian public stood waiting to cheer, careful research demonstrates that the use of carte photographs was fashionable within the Imperial circle as early as 1856 and had grown naturally out of the exchanging of visits and cards on New Years Day. So popular were the New Year's

portraits among the style conscious that satirists noted that by 1860 the actual visiting of friends to leave one's calling card had been replaced by merely sending photographs. Nor were the poses which are typical of the carte devoid of particular meaning. When seen in the broader context of French portraiture, they are revealed as a distillation of the values of the French bourgeoisie and the new aristocracy. The full length standing portrait had long been associated with individuals possessing political power. Carte de visite studios marketed the trappings and pretension of that dominant class to all who wished to emulate it. While stylists such as Disderi expropriated props and compositional devices from a variety of traditional sources, the emerging conventions of fashion illustration seem to have been the most influential. As a former millinery and lingerie merchant, he was certainly aware of the attention paid to such sources by those who judged social position by outward appearances. Such surface judgements were not merely the pretension of the stylish but insecure new rich. A continuing concern among nineteenth century intellectuals for the physiognomic theories of Johann Casper Lavater demonstrates the importance that was placed on analyzing posture and surface anatomy as indicators of character. Having established the primary poses used in the cartes de visite and their influence on artists in other media, McCauley insists that, as in dress, any deviation from the established norm must be taken as significant in its own time, and she proceeds to explicate a series of such exceptions.

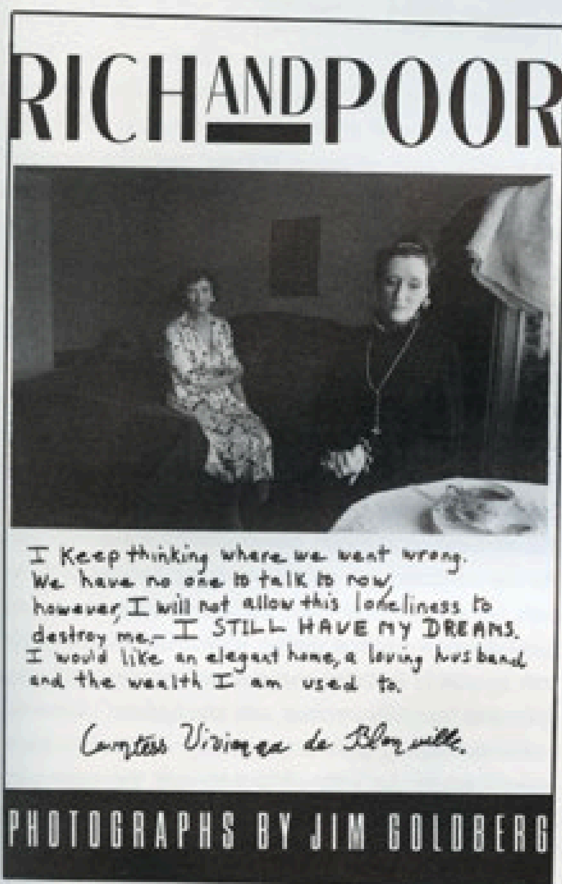
The rapid expansion of the photographic industry in Paris is also documented in this study; by 1860 there were 207 establishments of which 16 had more than 10 employees. A survey that year provides a breakdown by age and gender as well as salary differentials and gross earnings. More detailed accounts of the contents and business affairs of Disderi's various establishments provide insight into the ambience of the studio and hints at the important role of professional and labor organizations in determining fair practices. This kind of basic scholarly data for the study of the economic and social history of photography has been slow to emerge from a literature aimed primarily at a popular audience. Without an understanding of the non-visual factors which conditioned the vast majority of photographic productions, the history of photography will continue to be based on the false assumption that studio owners were personally responsible for the works attributed to them and will be recounted in anecdotal fabrications and formalist analyses. While much remains to be retrieved, information from an internationally influential center of studio photography such as Paris is particularly useful.

In most primary research projects numerous bodies of related materials are discovered during the investigation and are worthy of separate publication or as secondary chapters in a book format. Various topical categories receive expanded attention in this case, including celebrity and theatrical portraits as well as the influence of the carte de visite on painters such as Degas and Manet. Collections of cartes de visite originally filed with the French government in compliance with censorship laws provide this study with secure sequential dating and evidence that an image was commercially distributed. The development of the photographically illustrated celebrity biography as a genre is traced to as early as 1853, and Disderi was engaged in such a multi-volume project from 1860-1862. Cross comparison of the professions of the subjects in these various sets of portraits makes it possible to deduce much about the affiliations and politics of their makers. Particular attention is given to the careers and reputations of various theatrical performers who were photographed by numerous studios. The role of photography in the evolving visions of Degas and Manet has become a focus for disagreement among historians interested in the impact of photography on painting, and has generated a literature of scholarly worth which is rare in the discipline. McCauley's original contributions to this debate include much new information and many examples. While restrained in her claims for direct derivation, she clearly sides with those who believe that the carte de visite played a significant role in the formation of Degas' and Manet's mature imagery.

The decline of the carte de visite as a popular format did not reflect an end to the democratizing perceptions which it had encouraged. The generation of its popularity had seen history for the first time in images of everyman; access to inexpensive

likenesses brought not only a degree of immortality but a claim to equality in an increasingly mechanistic and demystified model of society. It is ironic that Disderi, who was apparently an idealistic socialist in youth and a pragmatic supporter of the ruling elite as a mid life entrepreneur, should have provided such a consequential tool for social awareness. Like George Eastman and many others who shaped modern photography, Disderi's lasting contribution was not technical, and it will probably outlast even those millions of rugged little portraits we link to his name.

— *Keith McElroy*



Rich and Poor
Jim Goldberg
Random House, 1985

I'd like to think that I'm partly responsible for the publication of this book. When I met Jim Goldberg several years ago, he was about to let a university press bring out his work. I told him not to, that the material had a wider appeal that would interest a trade publisher. Now that Random House has done the book, I ought to be pleased. But I'm not, quite. *Rich and Poor* doesn't satisfy me *as a book* the way I hoped it would.

Let me emphasize that my problems are with the book, not the pictures. In the "Afterword" Goldberg explains his work in terms of "the class system" and "class disparities"; he speaks of "consumer capitalism" and "the abuse of power." Between the title on the cover and this essay at the end, he is trying to prop up with the bookends of sociology work that can't even be contained by such ideas, let alone supported by them. The "Afterword" is an after-thought. It came before the book, but after the photographs. It came between the two in a divisive way.

For these photographs are not about class or economic differences. On the contrary, what makes them compelling is how alike they show the opposite ends of the social spectrum to be. Goldberg's approach — used first among residents of an SRO hotel, then in the homes of the San Francisco elite — was to take 35mm portraits of subjects who were later shown the pictures and asked to write down a few lines, sometimes drawn from taped interviews, to accompany a print of their choice. The result is that we see the rich to be as filled with false hopes, shattered dreams and self-delusion as the poor.

"I look like a poor old sexy fat man," says Stew as he sits on the bed in his welfare hotel, staring out the window amid the clutter of mouldy TV dinners and torn wallpaper. ". . . .I don't admire that decadent life style. By living simply and not letting myself become part of the rat race — I'm as rich as anyone can be."

On the other side of town, Arthur, who is also on his bed looking out the window, confides, "We have a great lifestyle. We love private airplanes, fancy yachts, cars & vacations. . . .We are an exciting couple. I have power because I am a good person. . . ." Arthur is looking out his window the way a looter looks in at a department store through broken plate glass. He is kneeling behind his wife, clasping

her around the waist, pinioning her arms to her sides. It's as if he's desperately hanging on to the possessions he's got while looking around for something else to glaum. He's a real hard-grabber, Arthur is. And he's every bit as transparent and pathetic as poor Stew sitting alone in his flop house.

Although I have reservations about the book, I'm not bothered, as many viewers are, by Goldberg's methods in obtaining these documents. They are more of an assembly of elements than they at first appear. The subject always had final approval; but the choice of words was sometimes prompted, from the tapes, by Goldberg, and they were written on clear acetate, not on the prints as it seems here. This means the impression that the comments were a direct response to the portraits is a fiction, which makes some viewers uneasy.

But all great photography is illusionary, an imaginative document rather than a merely factual one. At their best these pictures do indeed become a form of fiction. In their terse, economical way, they have a kind of Dickensian reach as caricature. Beneath their class differences his subjects share a certain, sad Americanism the way Dickens' characters share their Englishness. Goldberg glimpses in rich and poor alike a residue of common, elemental humanity of which we rarely catch sight in our divisive, post-modern, post-Marxist world.

The self-revelations and self-betrayals of the captions are so startling that they might make us overlook the photographs themselves. Yet the words rely on the pictures rather than vice versa. Goldberg's skill as a photographer, which might at first have amounted to nothing more than formal control, gave him the only real access he had to these people. Formalism is particularly noticeable in pictures of the rich, who had a formality of their own Goldberg needed to oppose.

A woman who describes herself as a "grand dame" is posed against windows beyond which trees are seen. The backlighting pushes her regal thinness over the edge into gauntness. The gnarled limbs outside impart a tortured quality to the rigid figure she strikes; they suggest the arthritic condition of her values. In another room in this collective mansion Goldberg is exploring, a younger woman speaks of

Me and Bobby been together for two weeks and we're still happy
Susie m 54

her need for "a civilized existence" and sees "power, sexuality, self-confidence" in her own portrait. All around her are Roman shades ready to descend on her emotions like riot shutters. Their stark, black borders are like serpents coiled in her garden.

Out of such formal control over the situation and his subject's placement in it grew the psychological control that the portraitist must have. Goldberg didn't manipulate his subjects; he only perceived them sharply. He caught them at just the right moment to fix them in our mind. The first portrait he did of wealthy subjects demonstrates his technique. As the husband sat glumly waiting for his wife to take her place at his side, she entered the room and paused to give him a doting look. All Goldberg did was to realize that that *was* the picture. "Edgar looks splendid here. His power and strength of character come through. . . .We are totally devoted to each other," wrote the wife. When he saw the same picture, her husband put down, "My wife is acceptable. Our relationship is satisfactory."

Sometimes the subjects try to cover up with their words what the photograph reveals. At other times, they blurt out its truth like criminals confessing in the face of irrefutable evidence. Either way, the hollowness of the ambitions and clumsiness of the emotions make the rich indistinguishable from the poor. Goldberg had an ability to photograph opu-

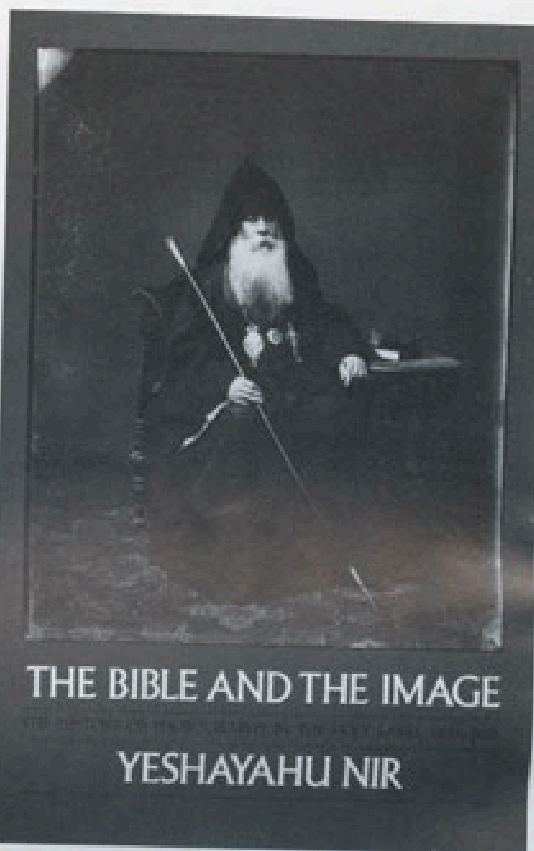
lent interiors with his wide-angle lens so thay they look as empty and impersonal as cheap rented rooms with washstands in their corners and a hot plate for a stove. In such environments affluent WASPs speak about their lives with the same insecurity, the same bravado verging on anguish, as the welfare families and down-and-outers do.

As must be obvious by now, I have a very high opinion of these documents. To me they seem a truly original, unique body of work. (Certainly Bill Owens' *Suburbia* comes nowhere near their poignancy.) They have the rawness of a new raw material, something that doesn't fit existing interpretations. This is why I'm upset with the book, because it would make the photographs conform to conventional thinking that is unworthy of them. The false construction is imposed even on the layout and pacing of the pictures, which are at times interrupted by two blank pages that face one another. This is so awkward, it looks like a mistake. To assure us that it isn't, the publisher has to include an unbound note like an erratum slip.

Had Goldberg approached his subjects in the frame of mind in which he wrote his "Afterword," I don't believe he ever would have gotten these portraits. For them he had to work without presumption, trusting to human instinct alone when he still had no theory or rationale for why he was doing all this. His utter ingenuousness, which I have seen when he presented his work in person, disarmed his subjects and made the pictures possible.

Maybe he had to find answers such as the "Afterword" contains to questions that were raised, as he went along, by the very process of taking the pictures. I only hope he realizes that an inspired intuitive process is all it ever was. It never needed to be more, as the book seems to fear. The truth is, literally, that the pictures speak for themselves.

— Colin Westerbeck



The Bible and the Image: The History of Photography in the Holy Land, 1839-1899
Yeshayahu Nir
University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985

Surprisingly, this book is not the exercise in antiquarian *préciosité* that its title might suggest. Though it does not make good on all its promises to use the history of photography in what is now Israel as a way of exploring certain potentialities of social analysis, still it provides something more than a quaint if handsome addition to the coffee table. And perhaps the unkept promises will be fulfilled by others on the basis of hints in the book.

As a contribution to the history of photography, it is limited but valuable, giving an account of the interaction between early processes and the special purposes of visitors to the Holy Land. Tourists and military surveyors and clergymen

Francis Frith (1858), albumen print. *Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives.* (Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem).

wanted to make photographs of Biblical sites for ends very different from those of photographers elsewhere: there was no bourgeoisie desiring to have portraits made by the new and modish process, as in Europe. Of course it was the bourgeois market that spurred the technical developments that overcame the obstacles of cumbersome equipment and troublesome chemicals. So although we pick up a brief chronicle of advancing processes and how they affected what pictures could be taken, it's as if they dropped from the sky, and we don't get much about the role of photography in nineteenth-century culture in general. But what we are offered instead is most provocative.

The author raises the question of whether all this activity was not a form of colonialist exploitation. Nir quotes with approval Edward Said's dictum that "Orientalism is a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. . . . All pilgrimages to the Orient passed through, or had to pass through, the Biblical lands; most of them in fact were attempts either to relive or liberate from the large, incredibly fecund Orient some portion of Judeo-Christian/Greco-Roman actuality." To this Nir adds his own credo:

> **The established history of photography seems to have overlooked the significance of the clash between European photographers and their colonial subjects. At the very least, it has been presented as undeserved animosity directed toward a harmless device. In fact, the industrial world provided the maker of pictures with a technology that enabled him to dominate his subject. Photography enhanced his paternalistic mentality and led the photographer to perceive and depict the local population in Third World countries exclusively in Western terms.**

H. Phillips (1867), albumen print. *Polish Jews, Group of (Jerusalem).* (Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem).

Had Nir been able to do very much with the concept of "the depicted culture," this might have been a truly compelling book. As it is, we get mostly anecdotes — about cross-purposes, Jewish and Moslem attitudes toward images, the many ways in which social codes could be transgressed (as by coming too close to groups of women). This is disappointing, for one can easily see how fascinating it would be to go beyond anti-colonialist laments to an exploration of the nature of images and how they function under particular human conditions. What is it that we want reflected back to us from pictures? How do we see grainy gray patterns as representations in the first place? Is it a socially conditioned skill, as much evidence would suggest, and if so what is implied about the biology of perception in different cultures?

To be fair, one must say that pursuit of such questions would have necessitated a very different book, perhaps an impossibly hubristic one. Clearly Nir determined to provide first of all a thoroughly researched and documented chronicle, probably reasoning as do so many historical and textual scholars that his work might serve as a base for more speculative inquiries. As far as can be ascertained without checking sources and the like, he has done an admirable job. Sometimes there is too much detail, sometimes too little, but the text is always informative and never turgid; the index is poor, but the chronologies and bibliography are most helpful; overall it is a very well-produced volume, and many of the photographs have peculiar charms of their own. Some of them show things that cannot be seen any more, for one reason or another (my personal favorite is a picture showing the future Edward VII "under the Great Pine Tree where Godfrey de Bouillon pitched his tent A.D. 1066." Still, I hope someone goes further, at least with the topic of photography as a colonialist enterprise.

Nir might also have done more with his insights into the mental furniture of those early photographers who were religiously motivated. He makes some attempts to differentiate British Protestant and French Catholic attitudes, and how these dictated quite dissimilar perceptions of monuments and landscapes. Again, though, we get more of an appetizer than a meal. One could wish there were more about nineteenth-century Biblical interpretation in the book; there might be some intriguing correlations.

On the other hand, it is helpful to be reminded that many travellers of that century were seeking to "prove" the truth of the Bible in a documentary way. Photographs opened a new world for those who wanted to produce such works as *Evidence of the Truth of the Christian Religion* (1847) and *Earthly Footsteps of the Man of Galilee and the Journeys of the Holy Apostles* (1894). Particularly zealous were American clergymen, on whom Nir quotes the historian Herbert Hovenkamp:

> **Religious Americans were almost as fascinated by Palestine as they were by their own land. . . . The places described by the Bible awed them, and they were equally awed by the men who had been there. Every clergyman yearned to visit the Holy Lands and to tell his congregation about them. Three years at Princeton Seminary provided one kind of education, but a visit to Jerusalem provided another, equally important. . . . The Holy Land explorer moved not only through space**

but through time as well — and when he arrived he found his discoveries immensely satisfying. Things in the Holy Land still appeared very much as the Bible described them. To go there was not to discover conclusive evidence that the Bible was infallible, but it *was* sufficient to demonstrate that the Bible was not an elaborate hoax.

Needless to say, the "album of views" became a much prized embellishment of American parlors. Among other things, this can remind us of another anti-Western critique: that in the early chapters of *Tristes Tropiques*, in which Lévi-Strauss ironically denounces travel books and gives his *tu quoque* indictment of Western audiences who scoff at paltry savage "magic" but credulously swallow tales (and photographs) of the remote, the exotic, the primitive. I think also of the dissection of "the romance of time-travel" in Hugh Kenner's *Pound Era*.

Nir appositely quotes Mark Twain, whose tour in 1867 confirmed his suspicion that earlier clerical travellers had literally seen their own predetermined Baptist, Presbyterian, etc. Palestines. Along this line, Nir proposes that daguerreotypes taken in 1844 by George Skene Keith represent the very first use of photography to support an ideological position. Keith used these to produce engravings (since daguerreotypes do not reproduce) of a carefully selected view of Mount Zion, one which emphasized its rural character and "omitted as much as possible of the impressive Old City" adjacent to it. This was to accord with the prophecy (Jer. 26:18, Mic. 3:12) that "Zion shall be plowed as a field." Such selectivity now seems comically tendentious, but Nir might have reflected on the character of Judeo-Christian tradition, in which religious claims are validated by appeal to history in a sense and to an extent unrivalled in the ancient world. Seeing God's hand in particular events is not unusual, of course, but seeing the kinds of patterns we call history is; and many scholars believe that it was the Hebrews, not the Greeks (still less the Chinese), who bequeathed to us this mode of thought. If we define history as an anxiety about the meaning of the past, we see the link between our times and the Bible even if we no longer seek God's purposes in that mode. Furthermore, Christianity has often operated by kerygmatic or proclamatory "bearing witness," testifying or confessing: in secularized forms this becomes the "I-was-there" declaration latent in all photography. So Keith's advocacy is even more à propos than Nir thinks. We might remember that Whitman, whose work is typified by the line "I am the man, I suffer'd, I was there," was probably the first poet to whom photography meant anything.

Nir does not make this connection, but he does furnish some other anecdotes of great suggestiveness about literary figures, in addition to Twain's skewerings of fatuous clerics. Here is Melville, on tour in 1856: "Is the desolation of the land the result of the fatal embrace of the Deity? Hapless are the favorites of heaven. In the emptiness of the lifeless antiquity of Jerusalem the emigrant Jews are like flies that have taken up their abode in a skull." All the bitter ingenuity of Melville's "quarrel with God" is in that phrase. Flaubert, an even finer connoisseur of loathing, accompanied his picture-taking friend Maxime du Camp to the Holy land in 1850. He wrote: "Jerusalem is a house of bones surrounded by walls. Everything is rotting there — in the streets dead dogs, in the churches the religions." Interestingly, both Flaubert's and Melville's reactions are related to Keith's attempt to validate the prophecies of God's judgment on the land. In other words, the power of Judeo-Christian witnessing compels even those who would invert it.

One picks up many such bits of information from Nir's book. Who knew that the Dome of the Rock, on the site of the Temple, was not a mosque? Or that another early photographer was Lt. H.H. Kitchener, later of Khartoum and the Boer War, and finally the "great poster" of World War I (some thought his drowning in 1916 was a prerequisite to Allied victory)? He was working of course for Her Majesty's Ordnance Survey. And in light of current controversies about the dates and rates of Jewish and Arab settlements, it is interesting to learn that Jews were a majority in Jerusalem as early as 1860 — the appeal to history is endemic, although it's not going to change anyone's mind in *that* controversy. I would

Tsadok Bassan (190?), dry-gelatin glass negative, modern print. *The poor of the General Kitchen pray on the anniversary of death for the deceased Fruma Rasha being endowed by her daughter.* (Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem).

not like to leave the impression that Nir is an Israeli propagandist, however. On the contrary: he writes sympathetically of the Arab population, cites Arab historians as well as Edward Said, and dedicates the book to his parents, both lost in the Holocaust, and to those who believe with him "that one day we all, Israelis and Palestinians, will live in this country in peace and mutual respect." One can forgive much to such a gesture. May the day come soon — next year, in Jerusalem!

— *Herbert Schneidau*

Letters

To the editor:

When I received the Winter issue I skimmed Deborah Bright's essay, "Of Mother Nature and Marlboro Men: An Inquiry Into the Cultural Meanings of Landscape Photography" (*exposure* 23:4). I determined that it was serious enough to require careful scrutiny, and put it on my "read when there's time" shelf. The time came and I read carefully.

I guess everyone is a little angry with Szarkowski. Yes, his taste is narrow and he has occupied the MOMA throne with that point of view for a very long time. Yes, he's a formalist and most of us are tired of hearing about photography's inherent characteristics. But I would hate to try to teach at the introductory level without *The Photographer's Eye*. Formalism is not the decadent, aesthetic-experience-at-the-expense-of-humanity, male-oriented undertaking that many current critics would have us believe. Szarkowski's analysis, like Greenberg's, has simply been a fundamental process we have all had to go through before really coming to terms with our medium. Photography actually does function differently from other picturing systems and Szarkowski outlined, with great clarity, what some of the differences looked like and how we could understand them. That he does not seem able to clearly see past a position he established in the mid-sixties is a legitimate topic for criticism, but that was not the source of Bright's comments.

It is obvious that, though she has had a full decade to do it, Bright has not taken the time to give

New Topographics a careful reading. She writes: '... Jenkins blithely claims that while their photographs convey 'substantial amounts of visual information,' they are intentionally about what is in front of the lens, which he defines as above all *an aesthetic arrangement*, having nothing to do with the cultural meaning of those references." Please observe where the quotation marks end in the above excerpt. The rest of the statement is Bright's. Here is the complete sentence from my essay: "The pictures were stripped of any artistic frills and reduced to an essentially topographic state, conveying substantial amounts of visual information but eschewing entirely the aspects of beauty, emotion and opinion." Further, when I wrote this, I was not referring to any of the photographers in the exhibition but to Ed Ruscha. I was pointing out that, while Rushca was, perhaps, a stylistic antecedent to the photographers in the show, he was too much a formalist for inclusion.

Bright went on to quote John Schott, again displaying her gross misreading of my text. I wrote and quoted as follows: "Ruscha's pictures of gasoline stations are not about gasoline stations but about a set of aesthetic issues. John Schott summarized the position neatly: ...they [Ruscha's pictures] are not statements about the world through art, they are statements about art through the world." Bright lifted this quote as though it referred to the exhibition when, in fact, it was used to delineate a position specifically and critically *excluded* from *New Topographics*.

I am fully aware that, in her discussion of *New Topographics*, Bright's purpose was to condemn it as a formalism. Formalism is nothing more than a platform upon which we stand to critically examine the internal structure of our activity; as Szarkowski said, to see "what photographs look like and why they look that way." To suggest that formalism and modernism are: (a) the same thing and, (b) obsolete (a rather popular critical position of late), is to suggest that we fully understand everything about our medium and our activity as artists. I hardly think we can afford to be so arrogant.

Finally, I would like to address Bright's repeated admonitions to curators for their failure to include women in exhibitions and publications on landscape photography. The fact is that, until very recently, there have not been many women making landscape photographs. If there have, Bright does not mention them. It seems to me that Bright, as a feminist, could be asking much more relevant questions. Have women not had access to the landscape? Why not? The first part of Bright's essay eloquently sets forth a view of the history of landscape imagery as a process of acquisition through picturing; an aggressive, imperialistic, masculine process. This was the beginning of an essay which could have been very much to the point. Alas.

William Jenkins
Arizona State University

Deborah Bright responds:

While it is understandable that William Jenkins should scrutinize with particular interest that part of my essay that dealt directly with *The New Topographics*, it was only one component of my much broader historical critique of American approaches to landscape in vernacular, as well as fine art, contexts. Nonetheless, it is true that in art photography *The New Topographics* has exerted enormous influence on a whole generation of landscape photographers and therefore it merits particular attention for the claims that have been made for it as well as for what it actually delivers. It is also true that I make no bones about my feminist historical perspective in addressing these issues. My writing, like my art, is timebound and culture-bound, but this is hardly cause for indictment—it is the fate, the limitation, of all critics.

Yet most of the established writing about art photography makes no such acknowledgement of *its* interests, instead basing its practices on supposedly universal and unimpeachable truths about the essential nature of photographs and the uniqueness of photography as a medium. How photographs are produced and used culturally is presumed to belong to some other discourse entirely. As Jenkins' introduction to *The New Topographics* catalog makes abundantly clear, the photographers themselves were united almost to a man in their refusal to recognize their own ideological biases in making the kinds of "documents" they did. However, if some future cultural historian tries to determine what collective assumptions structured these bodies of work made a decade ago by Nixon, Deal, Baltz, Adams, *et al.*, it is likely that the culturally-dominant white, educated, middle-class liberal humanism (which some critics would link to the larger context of late twentieth century capitalism and others would ascribe to other combinations of historical factors) will emerge as an important "structure of feeling" (to use Raymond Williams'

term) in these pictures of pre-fab housing, industrial parks, and the auto-motivated sprawl of the New West. These commercial strips and housing developments are made esthetically respectable, an act which, as William Stott points out in relation to Walker Evans, is tantamount to granting these subjects "*full* respectability ... so highly do we value 'art.' " The inhabitants and social relations that produce these subjects are made invisible to us while the material culture is reified and presented as part of a new "natural" order with its own inherent beauty—a beauty quite different from (and more "objective" than) the old "scenic wonder" beauty in western landscape photography. This new order requires a sophisticated sensibility to appreciate it—one schooled in the detached ironies of Pop and Minimalist Art, not in social theory.

But cultural analysis is not what we get in the writing surrounding *The New Topographics*. Instead, we get endless discussions of individual style and art-historical precedents which link this work to the geneology of photo-historical tradition—of individual genius—going back to Timothy O'Sullivan. The invocation of O'Sullivan and Ruscha signifies that we are in the precincts of art, not political or historical analysis. While it is true that John Schott was referring expressly to Ruscha in the quotation I cited, Jenkins' assertion that *The New Topographics* photographers were doing something essentially different from Ruscha (i.e., making meaning beyond art meaning) is not supportable from the evidence of his text or the photographer's work. To me, Nicholas Nixon's cryptic catalog utterance summarizes the fundamental contradiction of *The New Topographics* mythos: "The world is infinitely more interesting than any of my opinions concerning it." First, we have to ask what Nixon means by the word "interesting." But the more problematic premise is one brought up by Jenkins: the notion that photographs can be objective statements about "the world" that transcend the artist's own frames of reference (opinions) as well as the material realities of photographic production at a given historical moment—the agendas of the mid '70s art world, for example.

The fact that these photographers reject political responsibility for their photographs doesn't "universalize" them, it merely grants viewers more freedom to interpret the photographs according to their own lights, or—and I think this is more insidious—allows any interests (corporate managers, culture czars, the government, the military) to use these photographs for purposes of their own. My position, like that of Martha Rosler, Allan Sekula, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, John Tagg, Jan Grover, and others, is that photographers must begin to take responsibility for their part in producing and invoking cultural meanings for their images. They must learn to "read" their work, not as the formalists do—to savor their structures as if they were internally sufficient—but as citizens *in* the world—to discover how photographs reinforce, oppose, or reconstruct our notions and assumptions about ourselves.

This does not strike me as a particularly "arrogant" agenda. To me, the greater arrogance has been the relentless and overwhelmingly successful reinforcement in photographic discourse (through curatorship, mainstream exhibitions, funding, publications, and particularly through photographic education) of the notion that artworks are *not* products of people, institutions, and technologies, but instead are artifacts of a "higher order," universally given, and thus not subject to historical determinations, historical meanings.

Let me reiterate the point I made in my essay, which has been made more eloquently by others: it is precisely this liberal humanist, "universalist" attitude that has been used to explain away the absence of women and other marginalized groups from surveys of the medium. How hard did Jenkins search for women landscape photographers in 1975? The fact that these photographers were/are obscure and difficult to locate does not relieve curators and critics of the responsibility to find us—though it does confirm our marginality on two counts. It is not women's access to landscape that is the problem. Rather, it is women's access to the means of cultural production that has been lacking.