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PHOTOGRAPHY WITHIN THE HUMANITIES*

I AM A WRITER AND A FILMMAKER. I don’t consider myself a critic, and I am above all not a critic of photography. But it’s from that strictly independent and freelance position that I am saying my say; it’s not as a member of the photography establishment or photography anti-establishment, but as an educated outsider.

It has occurred to me, however, that because of my special status in relation to the other people whom you have invited to talk before me that I might be in a better position than some of them to comment on the subject of this series. Obviously, to say ‘Photography within the Humanities’ is to name two things which raise a whole series of problems. The question is: What is photography? Then there is the other big word with the little ones in between – Humanities, which makes us think of a very particular set of values that refers back to certain cultural and educational ideas, so that Humanities is a term that comes up in, above all, university curricula. But that is a kind of condensation or synthesis or anthology of the most valuable cultural experiences and ideas and works of the imagination or creation within, I say, a given culture. But just to catch up with it in its relatively modern form, it does have to do with a notion of curriculum.

Now if anyone would think to suggest as a title for a series of experiences or lectures or discussions, Photography within the Humanities, he’s probably not mainly thinking of the humanities as being the subject under question but photography, because one of the first things to say about photography is that it is a relatively recent activity. Whether you consider it an art form or not, it is an activity over which people have debated (and) whose status has been under question. A lot of people in the early decades of photography tried to treat it as if it were simply some kind of copying machine, as an aid in reproducing or dispensing a certain kind of visual

* A speech delivered at a Wellesley College photographic symposium on April 21, 1975.
information, but not itself as an independent source of seeing or of material that would fundamentally change our visual sensibility, as, in fact, it has. And the history of taste and argument about photography has roughly consisted, to speak in broad terms, of the continuous upgrading of this activity.

One continues to have a great many debates, needless to say: 'Is photography an art or isn't it?' This very nourishing, if phony, debate has been going on for a century about whether photography is an art or not. I say it's phony not because there are not some real questions, but because I think that the questions — at that level — are oversimplified and fundamentally opaque. But it has been, if it is a form of mystification, an immensely creative mystification. The literature about photography by professional photographers is incredibly defensive. It is both aggressive and defensive, two stances that usually go together. One can sense, under all these exalted claims that are being made for photography, a very interesting and fruitful pressure on the photographer which has been this problematic status of the very activity itself.

By asking about the situation of photography within the humanities, one is covertly raising that old query: Is photography an art? — is it really a serious activity or a serious art; does it really have a proper place in the university curriculum, as a department in museums; is it different from the other art forms? In another sense, it is as I suggested before, a phony debate, because there is no doubt the battle has been won.

The question is rather, if photography is an art and is socially or sociologically accepted, is it an art like any other? It isn't exactly an art, like painting, and perhaps that may explain something about its current influence. In some way I would suggest that photography is not so much an art as a meta-art. It's an art which devours other art. It is a creation, a creation in the form of some certain kind of visual image, but it also cannibalizes and very concretely reproduces other forms of art; there is a creation of images, images which would not exist if we did not have the camera. But there is also a sense in which photography takes the whole world as its subject, cannibalizes all art forms, and converts them into images. And in that sense it seems a peculiarly modern art. It may be the art that is most appropriate to the fundamental terms and concerns of an industrial consumer society. It has the capacity to turn every experience, every event, every reality into a commodity or an object or image. One of the fundamental axes of modern thought is this contrast between image and reality. It doesn't seem wrong to say that our society is rooted or centered in a certain proliferation of images in a way that no other society has been.

To return to the point of departure, if photography has a place within the humanities, it might very well have a kind of central place, because it is not only a form of art under certain restrictions, but it also has a place where all kinds of sociological and moral and historical questions can be raised.

My purpose is not to evaluate the work of particular photographers, but rather to discuss the problems raised by the presence of photography, and these include moral issues as well as aesthetic issues. I think it's a perfectly good idea to study photography. I'm not talking about studying making photographs, but studying looking at them, and learning how to see, because the way in which you learn to see is a general education of sight, and its results can be extended to other ways of seeing. Another point should be made that there is such a thing as photographic
seeing. If you think of people actually going out and looking for photographs as a kind of freelance artistic activity, what people have more and more learned to value is something they get in the camera that they don’t get ordinarily, that they can see by means of the camera, and so they are changing their own way of seeing, in the very process of becoming habitual camera users. The world becomes a series of events that you transform into pictures, and those events have reality, so far as you have the pictures of them.

Most people in this society have the idea that to take a picture is to say, among other things: ‘this is worth photographing.’ And to appraise an event as valuable or interesting or beautiful is to wish to have a photograph of it. It has gotten built into our very way of perceiving things, that we have a fundamentally appropriative relationship to reality. We think that the properly flattering contact with anything is to want to photograph it. And the camera has indeed become part of our sensibility. So when Christopher Isherwood said, ‘I am a Camera,’ what he really meant was ‘I see. I see. I perceive. I am storing this up.’

One of the reasons I don’t take pictures is that there are a lot of other people taking them and that’s for the moment enough for me; and I feel I already do see photographically. Perhaps I see too much photographically and don’t wish to indulge this way of seeing any further. It is a very particular specialization of one’s sensibility.

How did you first become involved with photography from the critical point of view?

I’ve always been a photograph junkie. That is, I’ve always been very interested in photographs – I cut them out of magazines and collect, not originals, but copies, reproductions of photographs. The only difference is that recently I decided to write about some of the ideas that I’ve had over the last twenty years. So I embarked on what I thought would be one essay and has turned out to be six. But I’m not, as I told the people who invited me to Wellesley, a photographer; I do not take photographs; I don’t like to take photographs; I don’t own a camera; and I’m not a photography critic. But my writing about photography represents the expression, and in a certain sense, the liquidation of a very long-term interest. It’s precisely because I’ve been thinking about this for twenty years that I think I can write about it now. Somebody asked me what I thought I was going to do by writing these essays, and I said I’m going to cure myself of my addiction. That hasn’t happened, however.

In your opinion, is the normal everyday photographer any more aggressive, cannibalistic toward the world around him or her than a normal, everyday prose writer?

There are an unlimited number of photographs to take, every photographer feels that. There are not an unlimited number of things to write, except in a very cerebral sense, which no writer really feels. Every writer has to reach and is constantly aware of how basically it comes from inside; it all has to be transformed in the
homemade laboratory that you have got in your guts and your brain. Whereas, for the photographer, the world is really there; it is an incredible thing, it is all interesting and in fact, more interesting when seen through the camera than when seen with the naked eye or with real sight. The camera is this thing which can capture the world for you. It is not like a gun; it is not like doing people in, but it is a way of bringing something back. It enables you to transform the world, to miniaturize it. And photographs have a special status for us as icons and as magical objects that other visual images such as paintings and other forms of representational art such as literature do not have. I do not think that any other way of creating image systems has the same kind of obsessional power behind it.

Of course, the word ‘cannibalize’ is loaded and provocative and is perhaps overly strong, but I do not consider it to be a key part of my argument. My primary point is not to speculate about what picture taking does to people, but to consider the impact of looking at photographs and having this kind of information or experience of the picture. It is the consumption of photographs rather than the taking of them which concerns me and why pictures have become a regular nutriment of our sensibility and a source of information.

I think there are moral issues that are worth talking about, and one shouldn’t be afraid of them. I get kind of sad when I realize that what people seem to want is to be told whether photography is okay or not. I mean it’s part of the world. Let me give you an example. I’m probably being very indiscreet, but I don’t think he would mind—I had a call the other day from Richard Avedon, whom I had gotten to know as a result of these essays for the New York Review of Books. In fact, I didn’t know him before. I don’t think I would have written about photography if I had known any photographers. Anyway, we had become friends and we had a lot of discussion about the ideas of the essays, some of which he agreed with and some of which he didn’t. He said, ‘I want to know your opinion.’ He had spent seven weeks in Saigon in the early seventies and he took a great many photographs of the napalm victims, victims of American bombings of the Vietnamese. He did this on his own, with his own money. He was not sent by anybody. He set up a studio in a hotel in Saigon and among other things he photographed dozens and dozens of people without faces, without hands, bodies covered with scar tissue. He was asked by a major and very commercial magazine a couple of days ago to print these photographs. He’s never printed them. He’s never published them. He called me up and said, ‘What do you think? I don’t know what to do. It seems to me a terrible thing to do, and it also seems to me a good thing to do. I mean, I just don’t know.’ We talked for an hour about it. Was it an exploitation of these people? Are these photographs aesthetic? He had only shown me one, and I haven’t seen all of them. He said the photographs were beautiful. In some ways, they’re beautiful and in others they are absolutely horrifying. He said, ‘I don’t know what to do,’ and I said, ‘I don’t know what you should do either; after calling me up to ask my opinion I think I’m just as puzzled as you are. I can think of very good arguments for not doing it, and I can think of very good arguments for doing it.’

This is a tremendous, messy, moral problem. It doesn’t start with that phone call either; it starts all the way back when one does it. If you don’t publish them, you’ll have some regrets; if you do publish them, you’ll have some regrets. He agreed. I haven’t heard the news, so I do feel a little indiscreet about telling you
the story, but it's not a real secret and you may very well see these photographs in
the next few weeks. But the problems are real. The complexity is real. He's very
objective about his work, and he's very smart. He said they looked like Avedon
pictures, and yet they are of those people. He said he was crying when he took the
photographs, and yet they looked like Avedon photographs, very straight-on, white
background. He said, now I don't know what to do with them. I wonder if I should
have taken them, and yet I know if I had to do it all over again I would still have
taken them. It's very interesting; it put his whole activity into question. I do think
that people understand this. I don't think I invented these problems, and I think
that a lot of photographers are aware of them. These are the real moral and aesthetic
questions that are raised by this enterprise.

Do you wish that photography wasn't as ubiquitous as
it is? Do you resent that kind of intrusion into your
consciousness that you described as happening at age
twelve when you first saw photographs of Dachau?

Well, it changed my life. But I don't know that I would say I resent it. A lot of
people have seen photographs that have, whether they know it or not, changed their
consciousness. It's not a question of my reaction personally; it's a question of naming
it — naming this phenomenon which is very formative for us . . . this shock experi-
ence . . . . It's not that I want to say that you can't be shocked by anything but a
photograph, but here is this object, this image, which you can stumble or come
upon inadvertently by opening the pages of a magazine. It's not like a painting; you
know where the paintings are — they're in museums and galleries and if you want
to go that's a special experience; you go to it, so to speak. But photographs come
to you because they're all over the place.

The nature of the imagery, in which the imagery is very shocking and painful,
is certainly more common now, steadily more common than it was. There was a
photograph, you must have seen it, it was on the cover of both Newsweek and Time
magazines a few weeks ago, of a Vietnamese mother holding a child that was
wounded probably, or dying, or was already dead in her arms, facing the camera.
Now this is a photograph which you would not have seen on the cover of any news
magazine several years ago. I am not saying that people were not shocked by the
photograph; I am sure some people cancelled their subscriptions to those maga-
zines. But that kind of image would not have been acceptable, would have been
thought too shocking by the editors of those magazines a few years ago. I think there
is a process of becoming inured. I do not know if people become that much
more tolerant of the real thing because the imagery becomes that much more accept-
able, but inevitably there is a process of dissociation. So that often when people for
the first time are confronted in reality with anything like the level of cruelty in the
images they have seen, what they think is, 'It's like the photograph' or 'It's like
the movie.' They refer back to the images in order to have a direct experience of
the reality because they have been prepared, in some very dissociated way, by
the images and not by real experience. If you see a lot of images like that, the ante
is being raised; the image has to be even more shocking to be really upsetting.
In a way you are not present, you are passive when you look at the photograph. Perhaps that is the disturbing thing. If you are standing watching an operation, next to the operating table, you can change your focus, you can still look different ways, you can change your attention — make the close-ups and the long shots for yourself. There are also the surgeons and the nurses, but you are there. You are not there in a picture, and that is where some of the anxiety comes in; there is nothing you can do when you look at a photograph.

Photographs give us information; it seems that they give us information that is very packaged and they give us the information that we are already prepared to recognize obviously. It’s as if the words don’t have the weight they should have, so that one of the statements being made by any photograph is: ‘This really exists.’ The photograph is a kind of job for the imagination to do something that we should have been able to do if we were not so disturbed by so many different kinds of information that are not really absorbed. Photographs have this authority of being testimony, but almost as if you have some direct contact with the thing, or as if the photograph is a piece of the thing; even though it’s an image, it really is the thing.

**Do you feel that photography has promoted a new kind of seeing?**

Oscar Wilde said that the way you see is largely determined by art, in the larger sense. Though people have always seen, now there is a process of framing or selection which is guided by the kinds of things that we see reproduced. Photography is an art form which is basically and fundamentally connected with technology and a technology whose virtues are its simplicity and its rapidity.

Cartier-Bresson has recently said that he wants to stop photographing. He has always painted a little bit, but now he wants to devote himself completely to painting, and the reason he gave is that photography promotes ‘fast seeing,’ and, having spent a lifetime seeing fast, he now wants to slow down. So he’d rather paint. The existence of the camera does promote habits of seeing which are rapid, and part of their value is how much you can get out of this rapid seeing.

Technologically, the whole history of the development of cameras has been to shorten the exposure time. Beginning a few decades ago, you got virtually instantaneous development. That means there is an increasing enlargement of the scope of the photographic project. Thus, anything can be caught by the camera, and the whole world is material to be photographed. There’s no doubt that the reigning taste is for the photograph that makes the thing interesting. It isn’t interesting in itself, it’s interesting because it’s in a photograph. One of the many tendencies is to reduce the subject matter or have a kind of throw-away subject matter in photography. There’s nothing that wouldn’t make a good picture. I don’t think that presumption exists in the history of the other arts or — if it does — it is only recently, and partly because photography has become a model for our consciousness. When you have seen something extraordinary it goes with the telling afterwards that you want to have the photographic record of it; the notion of an event or situation or person being privileged and your taking a camera to record it are intertwined for us.
I was in China a year and a half ago and wherever I went, the Chinese said to me, ‘Where is your camera?’ I was apparently the first person to ever come to China in the past few years (since foreigners have started going again) who hadn’t gone with a camera. They understood, of course, that to get to go to China was a big thing for us foreigners and that what those foreigners did when they came to an event that was particularly interesting was to take a picture of it. I was very interested to see what people do with cameras in China, because it is the one country in the world where there is a conscious effort on the part of the Chinese leadership not to be a consumer society. Wherever I went in China, everybody had photographs of relatives: in wallets, on the glass under desks in offices, on the side of the lathe or the machine in factories. And they’d say, ‘That’s my aunt so-and-so, or my cousin so-and-so; he lives a thousand miles away, and I haven’t seen him in two years; those are my children, those are my parents.’ Or you’d see, less often, photographs of famous holy places or important monuments. Those are the only photographs you see. When a foreigner comes to China and takes a picture of an appealing door, the Chinese say, ‘What would you want to take a picture of that for?’ And the person says, ‘Well, it’s beautiful.’ ‘That door is beautiful? It needs a coat of paint.’ And you say, ‘No, it’s beautiful.’ The Chinese do not have that idea that objects can disclose some kind of aesthetic value simply when they are reproduced, or that particularly casual, vernacular, off-hand, deteriorated, throw-away objects have a kind of poetry that a camera can reveal.

The point that I make in a number of the essays is that there is a kind of surrealist sensibility in photography which is very important, i.e., the casual ordinary thing is able to reveal its beauties when photographed. There is a whole tradition in photography, and I do not mean necessarily the so-called surrealist photographers, but precisely the people who are doing very straight-on stuff, like Weston photographing toilets and artichokes. One of the great traditions in photography is taking the neglected, homely object, the corner of something, the interesting surface, preferably a bit deteriorated or decayed with some kind of strange pattern on it. That is a way of seeing which is very much promoted by photography and has influenced people’s way of seeing – whether they use cameras or not.

Is there a difference in impact between still photographs and film?

The photographs change, depending on the context in which they are seen. One could say there is something exploitative; they become items, visual commodities to be flipped through as you move on to something else. It is perhaps a way of denigrating the subject. For example, I have seen those Minamata photographs, that are downstairs, many times. I have seen them in books and all kinds of magazines, and now I am seeing them in a college art museum; each time they have looked different to me. And they are different. Photographs are these portable objects which are changed by their context. You could say, of course, that that is also true of films. To some extent, under what circumstances you see a film does change it, but the photograph is more changed by its context, especially the still photograph, because it is such a compact and portable object. This is why I tend to favor films over
photographs on this question; the film establishes a proper context for the use of those images, and perhaps still photographs, in fact, are more vulnerable. I certainly think in some way a still image is and always will be more memorable. You can really remember a photograph and you can really describe it, in a way that you cannot describe two or three minutes of film.

What kinds of photographs do you find pleasing or good?

I do not know what it really means to talk about one’s favorite or preferred photographs. It is funny, I learned something about my taste this afternoon that I had not seen; the people who organized this set of events asked for us to suggest ten photographs to be put in the exhibit downstairs in the museum. I sent in a list of nine photographs that meant something to me, that I had meditated about. One of the nine pictures could not be obtained, so another photograph by the same photographer was substituted. That photograph stuck out so much for me as not belonging with the others. It seemed quite clear to me that it had a different aesthetic – that anyone who had eyes could have seen that I would not have chosen that photograph, though I could have and did choose the other eight. I chose a very straight, tough, hard edged portrait photograph by Brassai called ‘Rome-Naples Express.’ For some reason they could not get it and put this soft-focus, sentimental, touristic Brassai photograph of a Paris book-stall on the Seine. Seeing the eight I had chosen I realized that they – in contrast with the one I had not – had something in common, even aesthetically. They all had a hard edge quality and a very high definition. All of them are upsetting, for one thing. It is funny since I have never tried to understand what makes me like one photograph over another.

Note