Not an Art

by Theodore Dalrymple (August 2020)

Money, Dilyan Dochev, 2010

Photography is not an art, declared the famous French author, Michel Houellebecq: and at least no one could accuse him of equivocation on the subject. Absence of equivocation, however, is not quite the same as the pronouncement of truth, in fact not by a long shot. The history of human intellection is to a large extent that of the enunciation of certainties that have subsequently proved to be false.

Is photography an art? Presumably one would have first to define what an art, and perhaps art itself, is. This is far from easy; one answer given by a philosopher, either exasperated by the search for an answer or despairing of finding one, said that art is whatever people consider or claim to be art. This, in effect, means that the word art means nothing at all, for if this doctrine were to be taken seriously, it would have the consequence that if I were to say that brushing my teeth was an art, there would be no one able to gainsay it. There is nothing more destructive of serious thought than the demand or desire for more precise answers to a question than can be given.

Let us, then, content ourselves with the answer that, whether or not photography is an art, there are good photographs and bad, and that those who take good photographs rarely do so repeatedly by mere chance. 'The more I practise, the luckier I get,' a famous golfer once said, though no one is certain which golfer or when (and golf, by the way, is a sport that I abominate, believing it to have been invented to reconcile Man to death, insofar as nothing in the known universe can compete with it for concentrated futility, moreover skill exercised in pursuit of a futile end being far worse than an absence of

skill in its pursuit).

One has only to look at a few family albums—almost as excruciating as to watch golf on television—to appreciate that there are good photographs and bad. I have long advocated looking at bad pictures and reading bad poetry (provided good are simultaneously available) as an education in aesthetics. In fact, one of my dearest projects, if I were a very rich man, would be to establish a national museum of kitsch, in which I would display kitsch objects beside equivalent objects of exquisite taste: for example, a teapot in the form of Peter Rabbit, or in that of a 1950s Cadillac, compared with a silver teapot of the Georgian era—the danger being, of course, that most people might prefer the Peter Rabbit or Cadillac version.

Terrible photographs, the vast majority of those ever taken, suffer both from technical and artistic defects. The former, such as those of over- or under-exposure, are obvious and could, presumably, be eliminated by knowledge and training, at least in theory; but the second are more intractable, insofar as they relate to composition, or 'eye'. The latter is something difficult to instil. If someone cannot see at once that a composition is bad, it is difficult to know how to go about enlightening him. If he insists repeatedly when taking a photograph on too much background so that his real subject is but a dot in a nondescript landscape, or he clutters his picture with irrelevancies and cannot see what is wrong with this, one is at a loss what to say. It is like trying to instil a sense of melody into someone who is tone-deaf. Perhaps an eye can be inculcated early in human life; there have been, after all, periods in history when good taste was pretty general and was therefore not only a matter of individual preference, but social upbringing; nevertheless, there probably exist persons who are irredeemably refractory to all aesthetic judgment of hat they see. Even worse, of course, are those who positively like the ugly, or at any rate claim to like it for extra-aesthetic reasons such as that it

represents the cutting edge, the avant garde, or some other foolish notion born of the notion that art, like science, progresses.

I was drawn recently to the question of whether photography was truly an art by the purchase of rather a beautiful book of photographs of Mexico taken by Henri Cartier-Bresson and Paul Strand in the 1930s. It was the catalogue of an exhibition held in Paris in 2012 which had obviously failed to sell as many as were printed, because the price at which I bought it was much reduced. Irrespective of whether photography is truly an art, I shall return to it regularly for what remains of my life. I regret now that it is only comparatively recently that I have take an interest in photography, having in the past rather looked down on it as an activity or endeavour. By doing so, I wilfully denied myself a way of responding to the world: perhaps not the most important way, but valuable all the same.

Strand and Cartier-Bresson had very different styles: it would have been possible to distinguish between their pictures even without being told which had been taken by whom. Strand's were the more studied, resembling still-lifes in their composition rather than Cartier-Bresson's, which partook of the quality of the genre painting of the David Teniers type, albeit that the scenes that he recorded were in a very different time and place.

Of the two, I much preferred Strand's. They were of classical rather than of romantic sensibility, studied and poised without being posed. Nevertheless, one photograph of Cartier-Bresson's had a particular impact upon me, that of a man in a cloth cap turning towards the camera, wearing a slightly tattered brown coat of the kind that hardware store owners used to wear, in front of a display of elaborately-carved small coffins, evidently for children, presumably at an undertaker's establishment.

This, no doubt, was a commentary on the number of children in

the Mexico of the time who would never reach adolescence, let alone adulthood; we forget the normality of death in childhood of former times, not only in Mexico. In 1909, in the borough of London in which my father was born, a fifth or a quarter of children did not survive older than five.

Cartier-Bresson's photograph reminded me of my first brief time in La Paz, Bolivia, in 1982. I recall groups of people admiring a display of coffins, open to the street, at an undertaker's establishment, and it as true that there was an admirable and extensive choice available, in a range of woods and colours and ornamentations that would not have disgraced a fashion display, with pleated crimson satin linings worthy of a Dracula film.

Why were they there, gathered round the display of coffins ? Were they ghouls of some kind, or were they perhaps longing for death themselves? Was it that, in their impoverished world, a coffin was the only artefact that aspired to beauty? Was it only in death that they, or those whom they knew, could aspire to reside in an environment that was not purely functional or utilitarian, that beauty – or at least the attempt at beauty – would be granted its claims, its important place in human existence?

Certainly, Cartier-Bresson depicted a Mexico that was very far from romantic. There are several pictures of men collapsed in the street, probably from drink, one in a tattered suit and a homburg, face down in the gutter with the ground for his pillow. There is nothing in his photos that would induce you to go there, and plenty to cause you to give it a wide berth. This is not in itself a severe, let alone a decisive, criticism, for the photographer was not attempting a tourist brochure and there are in fact many places in the world whose reality is such as put off all but those who like to take their holidays in hell. No book, no set of photographs, can capture reality in its totality; and while the aestheticization of misery can so reconcile us to it that we

fail to recognise it any longer for what it is, and thereby cause a hardening of the heart, nevertheless photographs that aspire to artistic merit do need to have aesthetic qualities. By comparison with those of Paul Strand, Cartier-Bresson's do not have them.

Strand was eighteen years older than Cartier-Bresson, who was almost a tyro when he went to Mexico. Strand was much the more experienced, and his pictures have so classical a composition that one suspects that they were posed: but if so he must have had the skill to his human subjects forget his presence, as did the painter Sir Joshua Reynolds. Whether or not they are art, they are beautiful.

They are not *just* beautiful, however (except, perhaps, for the landscapes). A photography critic and friend of Strand's, Elizabeth McCausland, wrote, with fine perception, in 1940 that 'over and above the inscrutable faces of these men, women and children, lie hidden centuries of work, suffering and death' (I translate from the French translation of the original English).

Strand was at the very least a fellow-traveller of communism, if not an outright communist, and as far as I know never renounced the faith. He lived through a period when millions were starved or killed in the name or pursuit of the ideals that he shared, and if he did not know what was going on in the Soviet Union of the time it was because he, like so many others, chose not to know, for – contrary to myth – information was easily available. The problem was not that there was no information, but that people chose not to believe it.

That said, however, his photographs of Mexico seem indicative of more than the merely abstract humanitarianism of communists which proved perfectly compatible with, if not actually a precondition of, a willingness to starve and slaughter on an unimaginable scale. Towards the end of his life, the communist

historian, E. J. Hobsbawm, famously (or infamously) said that if the deaths of 20 million people had led to a communist society, it would have been worth the sacrifice. The problem with the 20 million actual deaths (or more) was merely that they did not in fact lead to a communist: it turned out that you could break eggs without making an omelette.

But to return to Strand. I don't think that someone without real sympathy for the actual individual human beings before him could have taken the pictures that he took. He has a respect for them which makes Cartier-Bresson seem merely voyeuristic by comparison. He gives his subjects a dignity even in their evident poverty, and ascribes to them pictorially a depth of character which is no doubt one possible consequence of the hardness of their lives that precluded all frivolity. Of course, he chose his subjects and his pictures for precisely the qualities that he wanted to portray, as does any author, and he wanted his viewers to generalise from his selection, and conclude that he was portraying Mexican reality of the time; in a sense, then, he has an axe to grind, but it is not an ideological one. You don't have to be a communist to join him in his sympathy for the subjects of his pictures, it is necessary only to be human.

There is something else that might surprise someone who knew only that Strand was a photographer of firm communist convictions: namely his evident appreciation not only of church architecture on Mexico, but of the statuary that they contained, and of which he took several beautiful and completely unironic photographs. There was nothing in them of the angry, mocking or sneering condescension towards religion habitual among the communists of the time, regarding religion as nothing more than the ideological smokescreen raised by the exploiting class to maintain or justify its exploitation (the attitude taken by George Orwell, incidentally, in his book *Homage to Catalonia*). On the contrary, Strand's pictures

encourage us to enter sympathetically into the world of peasant piety. This is unexpected, to say the least.

There is an important lesson here, perhaps: that a man is not merely the sum of his opinions. I suspect that we are in danger of forgetting this.

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Theodore Dalrymple's latest books are *The Terror of Existence: From Ecclesiastes to Theatre of the Absurd* (with Kenneth Francis) and *Grief and Other Stories* from New English Review Press.

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