Post-Modern Photography: Mirrors and Windows

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"Most of my likeness [daguerreotypes] do look unamiable; but the very sufficient reason, I fancy, is because the originals are so. There is a wonderful insight in heaven's broad and simple sunshine. While we give it credit only for depicting the merest surface, it actually brings out the secret character with a truth that no painter would ever venture upon, even if he could detect it."

(Holgrave in Nathaniel Hawthorne's The House of the Seven Gables, 1851)

Once an object of wonder because of its capacity to render reality faithfully, the camera has ended by effecting a tremendous promotion of the value of appearances. Instead of just recording reality, photographs have become the norm for the way things appear to us, thereby changing the very notion of reality, and of realism... The camera makes reality atomic, manageable, and opaque. It is a view of the world which denies interconnectedness, continuity, but which confers on each moment the character of a mystery. Photographs, which cannot themselves explain anything, are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation, and fantasy.

(Susan Sontag, On Photography, 1977)

Our post-modern moment in history is no longer concerned with the question of whether or not photography is Art. That question, which focused the criticism of photography for a century, assumed a certainty about the nature of Art which we no longer share. The more interesting question is what kind of an art form photography is. Why do some images engage us while the vast majority glide by? Given that photographs seem to have some special relationship to reality, what kinds of information do they really provide?
The two excerpts above suggest that our attitudes about photography have changed fundamentally during its 140 year history. From Fox Talbot’s original concept of photography as the “pencil of nature,” a transparent medium through which Nature used light and chemical reactions to draw objective reality with more than human skill, we have moved to a notion of photographs as signifiers without signifieds. Photographs point to nothing more than other photographs; photography has no privileged relation to reality, no special access to objectivity. Hawthorne believed the photographic process could give us access to truth about people. Holgrave’s daguerreotype of Colonel Pyncheon reveals his essential continuity with his murderous Puritan ancestor, an identity he has been able to mask heretofore. Sontag, on the other hand, believes that photographs explain nothing. Their seeming reality is an illusion, and photographs are no more than screens for the subjectivity of the viewer, objects which invite projection but give no usable information.

These two theoretical poles suggest that the relationship of image to reality (however defined) is central to our ideas about photography, and that our interest in this question arises naturally from the nature of the medium itself. Photographic lenses work like the lenses of our eyes. The images they produce conform to the rules of linear perspective institutionalized in Western painting during the Renaissance. The power that photographic images have for us depends in large measure on their ability to look “real,” on the illusion that they give us access to what is outside ourselves.

This sense of photography’s special relationship to the real, to truth, underlies one of the traditional dichotomies of photographic criticism, the “straight” versus the “manipulated” photograph. The notion of “straight” (or “pure”) photography was formulated in the 1930s by the f/64 Group in California—a loose coalition of photographers including Edward Weston, Ansel Adams and Imogene Cunningham—in reaction to the older Pictorialist tradition that began in the 1850s with the work of Oscar Rejlander and Henry Peach Robinson in England. The Pictorialists used a variety of
techniques to produce images. Several (up to 50) negatives might be combined to make a single print; the photographer might work on the negative or print with a brush to create painterly effects. Pictorialist images were often slightly blurred, a soft-focus technique used to give an Impressionistic feeling. The photographer might print only an enlarged section of a negative, using the enlarger to recompose the image during printing.

The “straight” photographer, in contrast, insisted on “previsualization”; the final print had to be fully visualized in the photographer’s mind before he or she exposed the negative. The camera was to be used, according to Weston, “for a recording of life, for rendering the very substance and quintessence of THE THING ITSELF, whether it be polished steel or palpitating flesh.” Straight photography required sharp focus and as much depth of field as possible (f/64 is the smallest lens opening and therefore gives great clarity and depth of field). Prints were usually made by contact printing from a large format negative (8x10” or larger). Cropping the negative was impure, an admission of failure in the crucial creative act of previsualization. In the 1950s and 1960s many “straight” photographers began including the sprocket holes of their 35mm negatives at the edges of their prints as proof that they hadn’t cropped.

The payoff for rigorous devotion to “straight” technique, according to the ideology developed by Minor White in the pages of *Aperture* during the 1950s, was images that connected with the transcendental. Straight photography became a Zen exercise; photographers (like Weston) who claimed that they were photographers, not artists, did so because they believed the truthfulness of their images transcended the illusions of ordinary arts like painting.

The “straight” ideology assumes that there is only one correct way to make photographs because only this technique can capture the real, the “thing itself,” the essence captured by Hawthorne’s fictional daguerreotypist. But now, since we believe that reality is elusive—not easily accessible through surface and appearance, more a matter of structure and relationships—the dichotomy between “straight” and
“manipulated” photographs no longer seems useful or enlightening. There is no one right way to make photographs any more than there is one correct way to write poetry or draw.

Because of the breakdown of its special relationship to reality and the proliferation of its techniques, photography (like other arts) has become increasingly self-referential. Photographs refer to other photographs or to the characteristics of the medium itself. The central question to ask about a photograph today is not whether it uses one technique or another, but how it situates itself with respect to the history of photography and the range of available techniques, and with respect to the relationship between the subjectivity of the photographer and the surrounding world of objects and presences.

John Szarkowski, Director of the Department of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art, has suggested a new critical dichotomy that may prove more useful than “straight” versus “manipulated.” In 1979 Szarkowski assembled a show at MOMA called “Mirrors and Windows: American Photography since 1960” which attempted to survey post-modern American photography. He suggested that we approach the photographs in the show either as mirrors, reflecting the photographer’s consciousness and concerned primarily with self-expression, or windows, openings onto the external world concerned primarily with exploration. “Mirror” photographs tend to be Romantic, expressionistic and suggestive, shot close to the subject or with a narrow angle of vision. They lean toward abstract simplicity, even a Platonic sense of types and essences. “Windows” tend to be realistic, descriptive, taken at greater distances or with a wider angle of view. They carry more information, they are more interested in particulars of place and time and, in that sense, more Aristotelian.

Szarkowski’s categories enable us to group photographs we would have separated before. Within the contrast between “straight” and “manipulated,” Jerry Uelsmann’s 1967 image in this issue of two men walking along a converging stone wall is clearly manipulated: one negative has been used to print the left hand side of the print, and then turned over to print the right hand side, thereby reversing the image left to right and making the entire print symmetrical. One side is
printed positive and the other negative, creating a dream-like mirror double within the photograph and suggesting alternate levels of reality. On the other hand, the image by Drex Brooks is a traditionally "straight" photograph, a carefully composed still-life concerned with natural light and tone.

But within the context of Szarkowski's terms, both images are best seen as mirrors rather than windows, expressions of the photographer's consciousness rather than attempts to give information about the outside world. Brook's image of the blown flowers becomes a meditation on the camera's mastery over time and a comment on the still-life genre. In general, photographs tend to deny time and context by freezing a single moment, and traditionally photography has been used to preserve peak moments (flowers in bloom). Commercial photography has created a consumer ideology around these atomized appearances which suggests that our lives can be an unending series of peaks if only we surround ourselves with perfect objects. But Brooks has waited until the petals fell instead of photographing the flowers in bloom. His image suggests a series of time-lapse photographs beginning with the flowers in bud and ending with this one. The image seems to be a statement about photography's inability to really stop time, to preserve the moment.

In contrast, the images by Richard Garrod ("straight") and Edna Bullock ("straight" in the printing, "manipulated" in the staging) are best approached as windows, attempts to give information about the outside world. Garrod's graveyard and mission recall Ansel Adams in both subject matter and precision of composition, focus and tonal range. Bullock's portraits are anti-portraits; they suggest a world where people cannot be known through their appearance, where they resist being known, defeating Hawthorne's daguerreotypist. "Lillie" looks away from the camera, engrossed in private reverie. In "Diane Farries, Jerry Uelsmann and Andrew," none of the figures looks at each other or the camera.

Neither of these "windows" provides anything like an objective view of the world, however. Garrod's attempt to frame meaningful configurations in the landscape creates patterns rather than finding them; Bullock's decision to have her subjects look away from the
camera lens rather than into it does not make her portraits more "documentary." Both "mirrors" and "windows" involve the subjectivity of the photographer: mirrors give us images constructed from a private sensibility; windows show us our shared world through the filters of another's consciousness.

Freed from the confines of "straight" versus "manipulated," categories which implicitly privilege "straight" photographs by the choice of words, photography becomes a broader art form best defined simply as images produced by light-sensitive substances. Ken Spector's photo intaglio combines photography, drawing and etching to comment on the relationship of image to reality; Nanda Schatz's collage unites her own duplicated photographs of cars with color xeroxes of magazine Madonna and Child to produce an iconography both private and public.

Finally, Sontag's claim that photographs "are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation, and fantasy" poses a question that transcends critical categories. A photograph, unlike a film, presents us with a single image divorced from any explanatory context. Consequently, any interpretation, any speculation about meaning must arise largely from the culturally-determined consciousness of the viewer. As photography becomes less sure of its relation to reality, photographic images become purposely opaque and unreadable, calling attention to the role of the viewer's subjectivity. The subject of John Hooton's image of reflections in a door seems to be its indeterminancy. We cannot make out the figure; the torn paper on the door looks like a word balloon in a cartoon, but its message is illegible. Fox Talbott's pencil of nature is broken; we are left in a richer but more confusing world of funhouse mirrors and frosted windows.