

“Photography and the Mass Media”

The basic effect of modern mass media on photography has been to erode the creative independence and the accountability of the photographer who has worked for them. This is not a value judgement (except from the point of view of the photographer) but rather a recognition of a shift in effective authority.

Within the memory of middle-aged photographers, photography was in itself a kind of mass medium. Photographers made pictures in response to stated or assumed needs, edited them, produced prints and with luck sold them. Only in the 1920s did the photomechanical reproduction of photographs begin to rival in importance the production of original photographs. With the development of picture advertising, picture journalism, television, etc., the photographer progressively lost his formal role as an independent small publisher, and became one of many dependent contributors to the large publishers.

The advantages of mass publishing have been well explained: a popular magazine, produced in an edition of ten million copies for a price of fifty cents, would cost fifty dollars (or whatever) if produced as a trade book in an edition of ten thousand copies. This does not necessarily prove, of course, that it is worth fifty cents.

One of the leading uses of photography by the mass media came to be called photojournalism. From the late 1920s to the early 1950s – what might have been the golden age of the speciality – photographers worked largely as the possessors of special and arcanum skills like the ancient priests who practised and monopolised the skills of pictography or carving or manuscript illumination. In those halcyon days the photographer enjoyed a privileged status. Editors did not understand what photography could do; better yet, they did not think they did.

By the end of the Second World War the men in the offices had gained confidence enough to regard photographers not as accomplished facts, meaningful or not in themselves, but rather as threads in a tapestry which had been conceived by a higher intelligence, and woven by a committee. The results of this notion have been on occasion fairly impressive. The standard picture story today is surely more handsome, and more graphically forceful, than the funny conglomerations of descriptive picture stories in the days of *The Munich Illustrated*, or *Life*, before the Second World War. The only thing lost in the process was content.

The causes for this shift in the photographer's role have been complex, and are, even in retrospect, difficult to sort out. The development and triumph of the small camera, for example, was partly a cause, and partly an effect, of the change. The nature of small camera work tends to put a premium on good graphics, and a handicap on good description. The photographer who was responsible for the meaning of his own observation could afford to suffer then

disadvantages of the clumsy, refractory stand camera, for he could look first and shoot afterwards, showing that which he had already consciously edited. The miniature camera expert, on the other hand, is able to cover the story (and himself) from all possible angles. The photographer who once shot twelve negatives in a day may now shoot thirty-six times that number. This freedom and flexibility of response has produced many magnificent and startling images beyond the reach of the deliberate procedures of the large camera photographer. It has also diluted the photographer's role in defining the story's meaning and increased the authority of the editor, who has assumed much of the critical burden that was once the photographer's.

The nature of modern reproduction methods – the half-tone screen and the bill-board blow-up and the television scanner – have also put a premium on simplicity and force, and a handicap on complexity and subtlety. The illusion of inexhaustible completeness which identified a fine photograph of the old-fashioned sort hooked the viewer by the eyes, as the Ancient Mariner captured the wedding guest, and pulled him into the picture as an object of contemplation. The good modern mass media picture on the other hand is less like seduction and more like rape. Its object is to make its point now and quickly. It is rare when we return to a magazine picture to find its second level of meaning, and there is no case on record of people stopping their cars to exhaust the content of a bill-board.

Concepts of Modernism, like other simplistic ideas, become dated. They may indeed become dated more quickly than

other ideas, since by definition they must be worn on the sleeves of their proponents. It should therefore not be regarded as criticism, but simply as historical observation, if we admit that there seems to be a certain flabbiness, an incipient exhaustion, in those styles of photography that were greeted as peculiarly modern twenty years ago. That particular skirmish in the photographic revolution (which we might call the available light fetish, or the small format fixation, or call the inflated film-speed competition) proved several things; not the least important was the fact that the frenetic slice-of-life picture could in time become just as boring as the dead-static or taxidermist's record, if each was done with an equal lack of both intelligence and of sensibility.

During photography's first century it was generally understood – in spite of occasional and localised aesthetic theories to the contrary – that what photography did best was to describe things; their shapes and textures and situations and relationships. The highest virtues of such photographs were clarity of statement and density of information. They could be read as well as seen; their value was intellectual and literary as well as visceral and visual. In the past generation, and increasingly in the past twenty years, photography has become increasingly interested in poetic sensibility, and less and less interested in clear observation. The typical picture of this period has possessed the virtues of economy, graphic force and simplicity of meaning. This simplicity of meaning has – not to put too fine a point on it – often verged on the vacuity. If the

characteristic failure of much of nineteenth-century photography was a sort of plodding, pedestrian literalness, the characteristic failure of much contemporary photography has been its banality; its lack of nourishing content.

The virtues and the failings of recent photography may not have been created by the mass media, but they have surely been useful to them. The photographer who has worked with consistent success for the great image-publishers of the time has found that taste and inventiveness have been more valuable commodities than intelligence and vision. For the former virtues can be more easily made of use by the committee process.

Nevertheless it may be of interest to note that some of today's brightest younger photographers have begun to look with sympathy and a strong sense of personal discovery at the work of photographers of the past such as August Sander, Eugene Atget, the Mathew Brady group and others whose pictures are compelling not only because of the rich allusiveness of their intellectual content. Such works can in no sense be regarded as 'purely' visual statements. They are on the contrary literary as well as visceral in their appeal. One such photographer, whose work has recently been rescued from relative obscurity, was the American documentary photographer Frances B. Johnston. Her carefully conceived and beautifully executed record of Hampton Institute in 1899 is an archetype of deliberate and descriptive photography. Formally, her pictures are

constructed with a noise and stability which suggest Poussin and Piero. The technical perfection of her platinum prints – what Lincoln Kirstein called their ‘fine-grained taffeta shimmer’ – renders the surface and the substance of each object within the frame; the light itself seems not merely a means of illumination, but a tangible presence. With these artist’s tools Miss Johnston demands and earns our attention. Having won it, she holds us but the richness and relevance of her description. These pictures are not only good to look at, they are good to contemplate. It is true that there is in this world of pictures no equivalent to the syllogism; in the end the picture ‘prove’ nothing. What they do is demand that our knowledge and sensibility be refocused in the face of new and persuasive experience. No artist could ask for more.

The requirements of the artist are, however, not necessarily those of his/her employer. Popular magazines, newspapers, outdoor advertising and television programmes are conceived as experiences to be flipped through, driven past or glanced at, and it would be irrational and small-minded to belabour them for succeeding at their appointed task. It can however be reported without prejudice that many of today’s best photographers are fundamentally bored with the mass media, and do not view it as a creative opportunity. Even well-established and prospering photographers of talent, artists well beyond the first flush of youth, have tacitly accepted a double standard for their own work: their livelihoods are made according to the standards set by magazines and agencies; their serious work is done on

weekends or between assignments, in the hope of producing an exhibition, or a small book, or perhaps only a personal file that someone, someday, will look at openly and slowly and with pleasure, without wondering how the picture might be made more 'effective' by tighter cropping and the addition of a good caption.

It may well be that the mass media will find no way to make use of the best talents of this post-*Life* breed of photographers. If so, it will be the worse for the mass media, for acute and independent observations would in the end serve them better than graphic gymnastics.