

From the Archive: Allan Sekula's "On the Invention of Photographic Meaning"

ON THE INVENTION OF PHOTOGRAPHIC MEANING

I

THE MEANING OF A PHOTOGRAPH, like that of any other entity, is inevitably subject to cultural definition. The task here is to define and engage critically something we might call the "photographic discourse." A discourse can be defined as an arena of information exchange, that is, as a system of relations between parties engaged in communicative activity. In a very important sense, the notion of discourse is a notion of limits. That is, the overall discourse relation could be regarded as a limiting function, one that establishes a bounded arena of shared expectations as to meaning. It is this limiting function that determines the very possibility of meaning. To raise the issue of limits, of the closure effected from within any given discourse situation, is to situate oneself *outside*, in a fundamentally metacritical relation to the criticism sanctioned by the logic of the discourse.

Having defined discourse as a system of information exchange, I want to qualify the notion of exchange. All communication is, to a greater or lesser extent, tendentious; all messages are manifestations of interest. No critical model can ignore the fact that interests contend in the real world. We should from the start be wary of succumbing to the liberal-utopian notion of disinterested "academic" exchange of information. The overwhelming majority of messages sent into the "public domain" in advanced industrial society are spoken with the voice of anonymous authority and preclude the possibility of anything but affirmation. When we speak of the necessary agreement between parties engaged in communicative activity, we ought to beware of the suggestion of freely entered social contract. This qualification is necessary because the discussion that follows engages the photograph as a token of exchange both in the hermetic domain of high art and in the popular press. The latter institution is anything but neutral and anything but open to popular feedback.

With this notion of tendentiousness in mind, we can speak of a message as an embodiment of an argument. In other words, we can speak of a rhetorical function. A discourse, then, can be defined in rather formal terms as the set of relations governing the rhetoric of related utterances. The discourse is, in the most general sense, the context of the utterance, the conditions that constrain and support its meaning, that determine its semantic target.

This general definition implies, of course, that a photograph is an utterance of some sort, that it carries, or is, a message. However, the definition also implies that the photograph is an “incomplete” utterance, a message that depends on some external matrix of conditions and presuppositions for its readability. That is, the meaning of any photographic message is necessarily context determined. We might formulate this position as follows: a photograph communicates by means of its association with some hidden, or implicit text; it is this text, or system of hidden linguistic propositions, that carries the photograph into the domain of readability. (I am using the word “text” rather loosely; we could imagine a discourse situation in which photographs were enveloped in spoken language alone. The word “text” is merely a suggestion of the weighty, institutional character of the semiotic system that lurks behind any given icon.)

Consider for the moment the establishment of a rudimentary discourse situation involving photographs. The anthropologist Melville Herskovits shows a Bush woman a snapshot of her son. She is unable to recognize any image until the details of the photograph are pointed out. Such an inability would seem to be the logical outcome of living in a culture that is unconcerned with the two-dimensional analogue mapping of three-dimensional “real” space, a culture without a realist compulsion. For this woman, the photograph is unmarked as a message, is a “nonmessage,” until it is framed linguistically by the anthropologist. A metalinguistic proposition such as “This is a message,” or, “This stands for your son,” is necessary if the snapshot is to be read.

The Bush woman “learns to read” after learning first that a “reading” is an appropriate outcome of contemplating a piece of glossy paper.

Photographic “literacy” is learned. And yet, in the real world, the image itself appears “natural” and appropriate, appears to manifest an illusory independence from the matrix of suppositions that determines its readability. Nothing could be more natural than a newspaper photo, or, a man pulling a snapshot from his wallet and saying, “This is my dog.” Quite regularly, we are informed that the photograph “has its own language,” is “beyond speech,” is a message of “universal significance”—in short, that photography is a universal and independent language or sign system. Implicit in this argument is the quasi-formalist notion that the photograph derives its semantic properties from conditions that reside within the image itself. But if we accept the fundamental premise that information is the outcome of a culturally determined relationship, then we can no longer ascribe an intrinsic or universal meaning to the photographic image.

But this particularly obstinate bit of bourgeois folklore—the claim for the intrinsic significance of the photograph—lies at the center of the established myth of photographic truth. Put simply, the photograph is seen as a re-presentation of nature itself, as an unmediated copy of the real world. The medium itself is considered transparent. The propositions carried through the medium are unbiased and therefore true. In nineteenth-century writings on photography we repeatedly encounter the notion of the unmediated agency of nature. Both the term “heliography” used by Samuel Morse and Fox Talbot’s “pencil of nature” implicitly dismissed the human operator and argued for the direct agency of the sun. Morse described the daguerreotype in 1840 in these terms:

. . . painted by Nature’s self with a minuteness of detail, which the pencil of light in her hands alone can trace . . .—they cannot be called copies of nature, but portions of nature herself.
(Quoted in Richard Rudisill, *Mirror Image: Influence of the Daguerreotype on American Society*, Albuquerque, p. 57. 1971.)

In the same year, Edgar Allan Poe argued in a similar vein:

In truth the daguerreotype plate is infinitely more accurate than any painting by human hands. If we examine a work of ordinary art, by means of a powerful microscope, all traces of resemblance to nature will disappear—but the closest scrutiny of the photographic drawing discloses only a more absolute truth, more perfect identity of aspect with the thing represented.
(Rudisill, p. 57.)

The photograph is imagined to have a primitive core of meaning, devoid of all cultural determination. It is this uninvested analogue that Roland Barthes refers to as the denotative function of the photograph. He distinguishes a second level of invested, culturally determined meaning, a level of connotation. In the real world no such separation is possible. Any meaningful encounter with a photograph must necessarily occur at the level of connotation. The power of this folklore of pure denotation is considerable. It elevates the photograph to the legal status of document and testimonial. It generates a mythic aura of neutrality around the image. But I have deliberately refused to separate the photograph from a notion of task. A photographic discourse is a system within which the culture harnesses photographs to various representational tasks. Photographs are used to sell cars, commemorate family outings, to impress images of dangerous faces on the memories of post-office patrons, to convince citizens that their taxes did in fact collide gloriously with the moon, to remind us of what we used to look like, to move our passions, to investigate a countryside for traces of an enemy, to advance the careers of photographers, etc. Every photographic image is a sign, above all, of someone's investment in the sending of a message. Every photographic message is characterized by a tendentious rhetoric. At the same time, the most generalized terms of the photographic discourse constitute a denial of the rhetorical function and a validation of the "truth value" of the myriad propositions made within the system. As we have seen, and shall see again, the most general terms of the discourse are a kind of disclaimer, an assertion of neutrality; in short, the overall function of photographic discourse is to render itself transparent. But however the discourse may deny and obscure its own terms, it cannot escape them.

The problem at hand is one of *sign emergence*; only by developing a historical understanding of the emergence of photographic sign systems can we apprehend the truly *conventional* nature of photographic communication. We need a historically grounded sociology of the image, both in the valorized realm of high art and in the culture at large. What follows is an attempt to define, in historical terms, the relationship between photography and high art.

II

I'd like to consider two photographs, one made by Lewis Hine in 1905, the other by Alfred Stieglitz in 1907. The Hine photo is captioned *Immigrants Going Down Gangplank, New York*; the Stieglitz photo is titled *The Steerage*. I'm going to assume a naive relation to these two photos, forgetting for the moment the monumental reputation of the Stieglitz. If possible, I would extend my bogus ignorance to the limit, divesting both images of authorship and context, as though I and the photographs fell from the sky. I'm aspiring to a state of innocence, knowing full well that I'm bound to slip up. Regarded separately, each image seems to be most significantly marked by the passage of time. My initial inclination is to anchor each image

temporally, somewhere within a decade. Already I'm incriminating myself. Viewed together, the two photographs seem to occupy a rather narrow iconographic terrain. Gangplanks and immigrants in middle-European dress figure significantly in both. In the Hine photo, a gangplank extends horizontally across the frame, angling outward, toward the camera. A man, almost a silhouette, appears ready to step up onto the gangplank. He carries a bundle, his body is almost halved by the right edge of the photo. Two women precede the man across the gangplank. Both are dressed in long skirts; the woman on the left, who is in the lead, carries a large suitcase. Given this information, it would be somewhat difficult to identify either the gangplank or the immigrant status of the three figures without the aid of the legend. In the Stieglitz photo, a gangplank, broken by the left border, extends across an open hold intersecting an upper deck. Both this upper deck and the one below are crowded with people: women in shawls, Slavic-looking women in black scarves holding babies, men in collarless shirts and worker's caps. Some of the people are sitting, some appear to be engaged in conversation. One man on the upper deck attracts my eye, perhaps because his boater hat is a highly reflective ellipse in a shadowy area, or perhaps because his hat seems atypical in this milieu. The overall impression is one of a crowded and impoverished seagoing domesticity. There is no need even to attempt a "comprehensive" reading at this level.

Although rather deadpan, this is hardly an innocent reading of the two photographs. I've constructed a scenario within which both images appear to occupy one end of a discourse situation in common, as though they were stills from the same movie, a documentary on immigration perhaps. But suppose I asserted the autonomy of each image instead. For the moment, I decide that both images are art and that a meaningful engagement with the two photographs will result in their placement, relative to each other, on some scale of "quality." Clearly, such a decision forces an investment in some theory of "quality photography"; already the possibility of anything approaching a neutral reading seems to have vanished.

Undeterred, I decide that quality in photography is a question of design, that the photograph is a figurative arrangement of tones in a two-dimensional, bounded field. I find the Hine attractive (or unattractive) in its mindless straightforwardness, in the casual and repetitive disposition of figures across the frame, in the suggestion of a single vector. And I find the Stieglitz attractive (or unattractive) for its complex array of converging and diverging lines, as though it were a profound attempt at something that looked like Cubism. On the other hand, suppose I decide that quality in photographic art resides in the capacity for narrative. On what grounds do I establish a judgment of narrative quality in relation to these two artifacts, the Hine and the Stieglitz? I like/dislike, am moved/unmoved by the absolute banality of the event

suggested by the Hine; I like/dislike, am moved/unmoved by the suggestion of epic squalor in the Stieglitz. The problem I am confronted with is that every move I could possibly make within these reading systems devolves almost immediately into a literary invention with a trivial relation to the artifacts at hand. The image is appropriated as the object of a secondary artwork, a literary artwork with the illusory status of “criticism.” Again, we find ourselves in the middle of a discourse situation that refuses to acknowledge its boundaries; photographs appear as messages in the void of nature. We are forced, finally, to acknowledge what Barthes calls the “polysemic” character of the photographic image, the existence of a “floating chain of significance, underlying the signifier” (Roland Barthes, “Rhétorique de l’image,” *Communications*, 4, 1964, p. 44). In other words, the photograph, as it stands alone, presents merely the *possibility* of meaning. Only by its embeddedness in a concrete discourse situation can the photograph yield a clear semantic outcome. Any given photograph is conceivably open to appropriation by a range of “texts,” each new discourse situation generating its own set of messages. We see this happening repeatedly, the anonymously rendered flash-lit murder on the front page of the *Daily News* is appropriated by The Museum of Modern Art as an exemplary moment in the career of the primitive freelance genius Weegee, Hine prints that originally appeared in social-work journals reappear in a biographical treatment of his career as an artist only to reappear in labor-union pamphlets. Furthermore, it is impossible even to conceive of an *actual* photograph in a “free-state,” unattached to a system of validation and support, that is, to a discourse. Even the invention of such a state, of a neutral ground, constitutes the establishment of a discourse situation founded on a mythic idea of bourgeois intellectual privilege, involving a kind of “tourist sensibility” directed at the photograph. Such an invention, as we have already seen, is the denial of invention, the denial of the critic’s status as social actor.

How then are we to build a criticism that can account for the differences or similarities in the semantic structures of the Hine and Stieglitz photographs? It seems that only by beginning to uncover the social and historical contexts of the two photographers can we begin to acquire an understanding of meaning as related to intention. The question to be answered is this: what, in the broadest sense, was the *original* rhetorical function of the Stieglitz and the Hine?

Stieglitz’s *Steerage* first appeared in *Camera Work* in 1911. *Camera Work* was solely Stieglitz’s invention and remained under his direct control for its entire 14-year history. It is useful to consider *Camera Work* as an artwork in its own right, as a sort of monumental container for smaller, subordinate works. In a profound sense, Stieglitz was a magazine artist; not unlike Hugh Hefner, he was able to shape an entire discourse situation. The covers of *Camera Work* framed avant-garde discourse, in the other arts as well as in photography, in the United States

between 1903 and 1917, and whatever appeared between these covers passed through Stieglitz's hands. Few artists have been able to maintain such control over the context in which their work appeared.

Through *Camera Work* Stieglitz established a genre where there had been none; the magazine outlined the terms under which photography could be considered art, and stands as an implicit text, as scripture, behind every photograph that aspires to the status of high art. *Camera Work* treated the photograph as a central object of the discourse, while inventing, more thoroughly than any other source, the myth of the semantic autonomy of the photographic image. In this sense, *Camera Work* necessarily denied its own intrinsic role as text, in the valorization of the photograph.

Seen as a monumental framing device, *Camera Work* can be dissected into a number of subordinate ploys: one of the most obvious is the physical manner in which photographs were presented within the magazine. The reproductions themselves were quite elegant; it has been claimed that they often were tonally superior to the originals. Stieglitz tipped in the gravures himself. Each image was printed on extremely fragile tissue; the viewer could see the print only by carefully separating the two blank sheets of heavier paper that protected it. One of these sheets provided a backing for the otherwise translucent image. The gravures were often toned, usually in sepias but occasionally in violets, blues, or greens. No more than a dozen or so prints were included in any one issue of the magazine, and these were usually distributed in groupings of three or four throughout the text. No titles or legends were included with the images; instead they were printed on a separate page prefacing each section of photographs.

The point quite simply is this: the photographs in *Camera Work* are marked as precious objects, as products of extraordinary craftsmanship. The very title *Camera Work* connotes craftsmanship. This may seem like a trivial assertion when viewed from a contemporary vantage point—we are by now quite used to “artful” reproductions of photographs. But it was *Camera Work* that established the tradition of elegance in photographic reproduction; here again is a clear instance of sign emergence. For the first time the photographic reproduction signifies an intrinsic value, a value that resides in its immediate physical nature, its “craftedness.” The issue is not trivial; consider the evolving relationship between craftsmanship and the large-scale industrial reproduction of images in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. With the invention of the ruled cross-line halftone screen in the late 1880s, photographs became accessible to offset printing, allowing rapid mechanical reproduction of photographic copy. *Camera Work*'s 14-year history parallels the proliferation of cheap photographic reproductions in the “mass” media. By 1910 “degraded” but informative reproductions appeared in almost every illustrated newspaper, magazine, and journal. Given

this context, *Camera Work* stands as an almost Pre-Raphaelite celebration of craft in the teeth of industrialism. In a technological sense, the most significant feature of the photograph is its reproducibility; the status of the photograph as “unique object” had an early demise with Talbot’s invention of a positive-negative process. And yet the discourse situation established around the unique image in *Camera Work* is prefigured historically in the folklore that surrounded the daguerreotype. The daguerreotype process produced a single, irreproducible silver image on a small copper plate. Photographic literature of the 1840s is characterized by an obsession with the jewel-like properties of the image.

The specimen at Chilton is a most remarkable gem in its way. It looks like fairy work, and changes its color like a camelion [sic] according to the hue of the approximating objects. (N.Y. Morning Herald, September 30, 1839, quoted in Robert Taft, Photography and The American Scene, New York, 1938, p. 16.)

Manifesting a kind of primitive value, a value invested in the object by nature, the daguerreotype achieved the status of the aeolian harp. The fetishism surrounding the daguerreotype had other manifestations, all stemming from a popular uncertainty about the process; women were commonly held to feel their eyes “drawn” toward the lens while being photographed (*Godey’s Lady’s Book*, 1849, quoted in Rudisill, p. 209). The daguerreotype took on the power of evoking the presence of the dead. Dead children were photographed as though asleep. In one documented case, the camera was thought to be capable of conjuring up an image of a long buried infant (*Daguerreian Journal*, January 15, 1851, quoted in Rudisill, p. 281).

But outright spiritualism represents only one pole of 19th-century photographic discourse. Photographs achieve semantic status as fetish objects *and* as documents. The photograph is imagined to have, depending on its context, a power that is primarily affective or a power that is primarily informative. Both powers reside in the mythical truth value of the photograph. But this folklore unknowingly distinguishes two separate truths: the truth of magic and the truth of science. The fetish (such as the daguerreotype of a dead child) evokes meaning by virtue of its imaginary status as relic—that is, by the transcendental truth of magic. The evocation is imagined to occur in an affectively charged arena, an arena of sentiment bounded by nostalgia on one end and hysteria on the other. The image is also invested with a magical power to penetrate appearances to transcend the visible; to reveal, for example, secrets of human character.

At the other pole is what I have chosen to call the “informative” function of the photograph, that by which it has the legal power of proof; this function is grounded in empiricism. From this point of view the photograph represents the real world by a simple metonymy: The photograph stands for the object or event that is curtailed at its spatial or temporal boundaries, or, it stands for a contextually related object or event. An image of a man’s face stands for a man, and perhaps, in turn, for a class of men. Thus, bureaucratic “rationalism” seized the photograph as a tool; the Paris police, for example, appropriated photography as an instrument of class war when they documented the faces of the survivors of the Commune of 1871. Here was the first instance of the photographic identity card and the photographic wanted poster; other equally “rational” functions were invented for photography during the 19th century; solemn portraits of American Indians were made as the race was exterminated; French imperial conquests in Egypt were memorialized. Reproduced, these images served as an ideologically charged reification of the expanding boundaries of the bourgeois state. The mythical image of the “frontier” was realized by means of photographs. While theories of affect regard the photograph as a unique and privately engaged object, informative value is typically coupled to the mass reproduction of the image. The *carte-de-visite* represented a move in this direction; every French peasant could own a visiting-card portrait of Louis Napoleon and family. According to Walter Benjamin, mass reproduction represents a qualitative as well as a quantitative change in the status of the photographic message. In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936) he defined a developing antagonism between artwork as unique-and-precious-object and artwork as reproducible entity. In Benjamin’s terms, the unique artwork is necessarily a privileged object. The unique art object stands in the center of a discourse within which ideology is obscured; the photograph, on the other hand, is characterized by a reproducibility, an “exhibition value,” that widens the field of potential readers, that permits a penetration into the “unprivileged” spaces of the everyday world. As a vehicle for explicit political argument, the photograph stands at the service of the class that controls the press.

French romantic and proto-symbolist criticism saw both journalism and photography as enemies of art. The complaints against the emergent “democratic” media are couched in esthetic terms but devolve, almost always, into a schizophrenic class hatred aimed at both the middle and working classes coupled with a hopeless fantasy of restoration. Theophile Gautier

expends the preface of *Mademoiselle de Maupin* in an assault on Fourier, Saint-Simon, and the realist-utilitarian demands of republican journalism:

a book does not make gelatin soup; a novel is not a pair of seamless boots; a sonnet, a syringe with a continuous jet; or a drama, a railway. . . . Charles X . . . by ordering the suppression of the newspapers, did a great service to the arts and to civilization. Newspapers deaden inspiration and fill heart and intellect with such distrust; that we dare not have faith either in a poet or government; and thus royalty and poetry, the two greatest things in the world, become impossible. . . . If Louis-Philippe were to suppress the literary and political journals for good and all, I should be infinitely grateful to him . . . (*Mademoiselle de Maupin*, London, 1899, pp. 28–44; originally published 1834.)

Edmond and Jules de Goncourt argue in a similar vein (1854):

Industry will kill art. Industry and art are two enemies which nothing will reconcile. . . .

Industry starts out from the useful; it aims toward that which is profitable for the greatest number; it is the bread of the people.

Art starts out from the useless; it aims toward that which is agreeable to the few. It is the egotistic adornment of aristocracies. . . .

Art has nothing to do with the people. Hand over the beautiful to universal suffrage and what becomes of the beautiful? The people rise to art only when art descends to the people. (“The Death of Art in the 19th-Century,” in Linda Nochlin, ed., *Realism and Tradition in Art 1848–1900*, Englewood Cliffs, 1966, pp. 16–18.)

Finally we come to Baudelaire’s famous dictum on photography:

. . . a new industry arose which contributed not a little to confirm stupidity in its faith and to ruin whatever might remain to the divine in the French mind. The idolatrous mob demanded an ideal worthy of itself and appropriate to its nature—that is perfectly understood. In matters of painting and sculpture, the present-day Credo of the sophisticated, above all in France . . . is this: “I believe in Nature, and I believe only in Nature (there are good reasons for that). I believe that Art is, and cannot be other than, the exact reproduction of Nature . . . Thus an industry that could give us a result identical to Nature would be the absolute of art.” A revengeful God has given ear to the prayers of this multitude. Daguerre was his Messiah. And now the faithful says to himself: “Since Photography gives us every guarantee of exactitude that we could desire (they really believe that, the mad fools!), then Photography and Art are the

that we could desire (they really believe that, the mad fools!), then Photography and Art are the same thing.” From that moment our squalid society rushed, Narcissus to a man, to gaze at its trivial image on a scrap of metal. . . . Some democratic writer ought to have seen here a cheap method of disseminating a loathing for history and for painting among the people. . . . (Jonathan Wayne, ed., *Art in Paris 1845–1867*, London, 1965, pp. 153–54; originally published 1859.)

Where does this rhetoric, the rhetoric of emergent estheticism, stand in relation to *Camera Work*? The American avant-garde was invented in French terms; the tradition of a dead generation of French intellectuals weighed on Stieglitz’s brain like a nightmare. Photography necessarily had to overcome the stigma of its definition at the hands of Baudelaire. The invention of photography as high art is grounded fundamentally in the rhetoric of romanticism and symbolism. The fundamental ploy in this elevation is the establishment of the photograph’s value, not as primitive jewel, not as fact, but as cameo, to use Gautier’s metaphor for his poems. Within this mythos the photograph displays a preciousness that is the outcome of high craftsmanship. This craftsmanship is primarily that of the poet, while only marginally that of the workman.

The 36th issue of *Camera Work*, the issue in which *The Steerage* appeared for the first time, was a Stieglitz retrospective of sorts. Perhaps a dozen photographs covering a period of 18 years (1892–1910) were included. No other photographers’ work appeared in this issue, nor were there any gravures of nonphotographic work. Among the prints included are *The Hand of Man*, *The Terminal*, *Spring Showers, New York*, *The Mauritania*, *The Aeroplane*, and *The Dirigible*. The prints cluster around a common iconographic terrain; they are marked by a kind of urban-technological emphasis, marked as a kind of landscape emerging out of an industrial culture. This terrain is defined negatively by its exclusion of portraiture and “natural” landscape, although Stieglitz produced images of both types in his early career. I think we can discern a kind of montage principle at work, a principle by which a loose concatenation of images limits the polysemic character of any given component image. I would argue, however, that this apparent attempt at “thematic unity” is less functional in establishing an arena of photographic meaning than the critical writing that appears in another section of the magazine. The major piece of criticism that appears in this particular issue is Benjamin de Casseres’s “The Unconscious in Art.” Without mentioning photography, Casseres establishes the general conditions for reading Stieglitz.

*. . . there are aesthetic emotions for which there are no corresponding thoughts, emotions that awaken the Unconscious alone and that never touch the brain; emotions vague, indefinable, confused; emotions that wake whirlwinds and deep-sea hurricanes. . . . Imagination is the dream of the Unconscious. It is the realm of the gorgeous, monstrous hallucinations of the Unconscious. It is the hasheesh of genius. Out of the head of the artist issues all the beauty that is transferred to canvas, but the roots of his imagination lie deeper than his personality. The soul of the genius is the safety-vault of the race, the treasure pocket of the Unconscious soul of the world. Here age after age the Secretive God stores in dreams. And the product of genius overwhelms us because it has collaborated with the Infinite. (“The Unconscious in Art,” *Camera Work*, 1911.)*

It would be hard to find a better example of modern bourgeois esthetic mysticism. In its own time, of course, this piece was hardly an expression of institutional esthetics, but stood as the rhetoric of a vanguard, moving beyond the romantic-symbolist catechism of “genius and the imagination” into proto-Surrealism. And yet the echoes of Poe and Baudelaire are explicit to the point of redundancy. Casseres’s argument has its roots in a discourse situation from which photography, in its “mechanical insistence on truth” had been excluded. In *Camera Work*, however, this text serves to elevate photography to the status of poetry, painting and sculpture. A drastic boundary shift has occurred, an overlap of photographic discourse and esthetic discourse where no such arena had existed, except in the most trivial terms. Casseres’s inflated symbolist polemic both frames and is a manifestation of this emergent discourse situation. But in order to get close to the semantic expectations surrounding any specific artwork, such as *The Steerage*, we need evidence more substantial than polemic. In 1942 a portion of Stieglitz’s memoirs was published, including a short text called “How *The Steerage* Happened”:

Early in June, 1907, my small family and I sailed for Europe. My wife insisted upon going on the “Kaiser Wilhelm II”—the fashionable ship of the North German Lloyd at the time. . . . How I hated the atmosphere of the first class on the ship. One couldn’t escape the “nouveaux riches. . . .”

On the third day I finally couldn’t stand it any longer. I had to get away from that company. I went as far forward on deck as I could. . . .

As I came to the end of the deck I stood alone, looking 41 down. There were men and women and children on the lower deck of the steerage. There was a narrow stairway leading up to the upper deck of the steerage, a small deck right at the bow of the steamer.

To the left was an inclining funnel and from the upper steerage deck there was fastened a gangway bridge which was glistening in its freshly painted state. It was rather long, white, and during the trip remained untouched by anyone.

On the upper deck, looking over the railing, there was a young man with a straw hat. The shape of the hat was round. He was watching the men and women and children on the lower steerage deck. Only men were on the upper deck. The whole scene fascinated me. I longed to escape from my surroundings and join these people. . . . I saw shapes related to each other. I saw a picture of shapes and underlying that of the feeling I had about life. And as I was deciding, should I try to put down this seemingly new vision that held me—people, the common people, the feeling of ship and ocean and sky and the feeling of release that I was away from the mob called the rich—Rembrandt came into my mind and I wondered would he have felt as I was feeling. . . .

I had but one plate holder with one unexposed plate. Would I get what I saw, what I felt? Finally I released the shutter. My heart thumping. I had never heard my heart thump before. Had I gotten my picture? I knew if I had, another milestone in photography would have been reached, related to the milestone of my “Car Horses” made in 1892, and my “Hand of Man” made in 1902, which had opened up a new era of photography, of seeing. In a sense it would go beyond them, for here would be a picture based on related shapes and on the deepest human feeling, a step in my own evolution, a spontaneous discovery.

I took my camera to my stateroom and as I returned to my steamer chair my wife said, “I had sent a steward to look for you. . . .” I told her where I had been.

She said, “You speak as if you were far away in a distant world,” and I said I was.

*“How you seem to hate these people in the first class.” No, I didn’t hate them, but I merely felt completely out of place. (“Alfred Stieglitz: Four Happenings,” Natha Lyson, ed., *Photographers on Photography*, Englewood Cliffs, 1966, pp. 129–30; my emphasis.)*

As I see it, this text is pure symbolist autobiography. Even a superficial reading reveals the extent to which Stieglitz invented himself in symbolist clichés. An ideological division is made; Stieglitz proposes two worlds: a world that *entraps* and a world that liberates. The first world is populated by his wife and the *nouveaux-riche*s, the second by “the common people.” The photograph is taken at the intersection of the two worlds, looking out, as it were. The gangplank stands as a barrier between Stieglitz and the scene. The photographer marks a young man in a straw hat as a spectator, suggesting this figure as an embodiment of Stieglitz as

Subject. The possibility of escape resides in a mystical identification with the Other: “I longed to escape from my surroundings and join these people.” I am reminded of Baudelaire’s brief fling as a republican editorialist during the 1848 revolution. The symbolist avenues away from the bourgeoisie are clearly defined: identification with the imaginary aristocracy, identification with Christianity, identification with Rosicrucianism, identification with Satanism, identification with the imaginary proletariat, identification with imaginary Tahitians, and so on. But the final Symbolist hideout is in the Imagination, and in the fetishized products of the Imagination. Stieglitz comes back to his wife with a glass negative from the other world.

For Stieglitz, *The Steerage* is a highly valued illustration of this autobiography. More than an illustration, it is an embodiment; that is, the photograph is imagined to contain the autobiography. The photograph is invested with a complex metonymic power, a power that transcends the perceptual and passes into the realm of affect. The photograph is believed to encode the totality of an experience, to stand as a phenomenological equivalent of Stieglitz-being-in-that-place. And yet this metonymy is so attenuated that it passes into metaphor. That is to say, Stieglitz’s reductivist compulsion is so extreme, his faith in the power of the image so intense, that he denies the iconic level of the image and makes his claim for meaning at the level of abstraction. Instead of the possible metonymic equation: common people = my alienation, we have the reduced, metaphorical equation: shapes = my alienation. Finally by a process of semantic diffusion we are left with the trivial and absurd assertion: shapes = feelings.

This is Clive Bell’s notion of significant form. All specificity except the specificity of form is pared away from the photograph until it stands transformed into an abstraction. But all theories of abstraction are denials of the necessity of metalanguage, of the embeddedness of the artwork in a discourse. Only if the reader has been informed that “this is symbolist art” or “this photograph is a metaphor” can he invest the photograph with a meaning appropriate to Stieglitz’s expectations. With a proposition of this order supplying the frame for the reading, the autobiography, or some related fictional text, can be read back into the image. That is, the reader is privileged to reinvent, on the basis of this photograph, the saga of the alienated creative genius. Casseres’s “The Unconscious in Art” provides the model.

Stieglitz's career represents the triumph of metaphor in the realm of photography. *The Steerage* prefigures the later, explicitly metaphorical works, the Equivalents. By the time Stieglitz arrived at his equation of cloud photographs and music the suggestion of narrative had been dropped entirely from the image:

I wanted a series of photographs which when seen by Ernest Bloch . . . he would exclaim: Music! Music! Man, why that is music! How did you ever do that? And he would point to violins, and flutes, and oboes, and brass . . . ("How I Came to Photograph Clouds," *Photographers On Photography*, p. 117.)

The romantic artist's compulsion to achieve the "condition of music" is a desire to abandon all contextual reference and to convey meaning by virtue of a metaphorical substitution. In photography this compulsion requires an incredible denial of the image's status as report. The final outcome of this denial is the discourse situation represented by Minor White and *Aperture* magazine. The photograph is reduced to an arrangement of tones. The gray scale, ranging from full white to full black, stands as a sort of phonological carrier system for a vague prelinguistic scale of affect.

Predictably, Baudelaire's celebration of synesthesia, of the correspondence of the senses, is echoed in *Aperture*:

Both photographer and musician work with similar fundamentals. The scale of continuous gray from black to white, within a photographic print, is similar to the unbroken scales of pitch and loudness in music. A brilliant reflecting roof, can be heard as a high pitch or a very loud note against a general fabric of sound or gray tone. This background fabric serves as a supporting structure for either melodic or visual shapes. (Eric Johnson, "The Composer's Vision: Photographs by Ernest Bloch," *Aperture*, 1972, 16:3.)

Minor White, true to Baudelaire, couples correspondence to affect; an interior state is expressed by means of the image:

When the photographer shows us what he considers to be an Equivalent, he is showing us an expression of a feeling, but this feeling is not the feeling he had for the object that he photographed. What really happened is that he recognized an object or a series of forms that, when photographed, would yield an image with specific suggestive powers that can direct the viewer into a specific and known feeling, state or place within himself. ("Equivalence: The Perennial Trend," *Photographers on Photography*, p. 170.)

With White the denial of iconography is complete. *Aperture* proposes a community of mystics united in the exchange of fetishes. The photograph is restored to its primitive status as “cult object.” White’s recent *Aperture* publication *Octave of Prayer* is a polemical assertion of the photograph’s efficacy as a locus of prayer and meditation.

I would argue that the devolution of photographic art into mystical trivia is the result of a fundamental act of closure. This closure was effected in the first place in order to establish photography *as an art*. A clear boundary has been drawn between photography and its social character. In other words, the ills of photography are the ills of estheticism. Estheticism must be superseded, in its entirety, for a meaningful art, of any sort, to emerge. The Kantian separation of the esthetic idea from conceptual knowledge and interest is an act of philosophical closure with a profound influence on romanticism, and through romanticism, on estheticism. By the time *Camera Work* appeared, idealist esthetics had been reduced to a highly polemical program by Benedetto Croce:

Ideality (as this property which distinguishes intuition from concept, art from philosophy and history, from assertion of the universal, and from perception of narration of events, has also been called) is the quintessence of art. As soon as reflection or judgment develops out of that state of ideality, art vanishes and dies. It dies in the artist, who changes from artist and becomes his own critic; it dies in the spectator or listener, who from rapt contemplator of art changes into a thoughtful observer of life. (Guide to Aesthetics, Patrick Romanell, trans., New York, 1965, p. 15; originally published 1913.)

Croce is the critical agent of the expressive. Art is defined by reduction as the “true aesthetic a priori synthesis of feeling and image within intuition” (p. 31); any physical, utilitarian, moral, or conceptual significance is denied. In the *Aesthetic* (1901), Croce wrote:

And if photography be not quite an art, that is precisely because the element of nature in it remains more or less unconquered and ineradicable. Do we ever, indeed, feel complete satisfaction before even the best of photographs? Would not an artist vary and touch up much or little, remove or add something to all of them? (Aesthetic: As Science of Expression and General Linguistic, Douglas Ainslie, trans., New York, 1953, p. 17.)

Croce had an impact of sorts on American photography through Paul Strand. Strand’s reply (1922) to the argument above is revealing:

Signor Croce is speaking of the shortcomings of photographers and not of photography. He has not seen, for the simple reason that it did not exist when he wrote his book, fully achieved photographic expression. In the meantime the twaddle about the limitations of photography

has been answered by Stieglitz and a few others of us here in America, by work done.

(“Photography and the New God,” *Photographers on Photography*, p. 143; my emphasis.)

Strand’s rebuttal is, in fact, a submission to the terms of idealist esthetics. The “element of nature” is eradicated by denying the representational status of the photograph.

Croce, Roger Fry, and Clive Bell form a kind of loose esthetic syndicate around early 20th-century art. Fry’s separation of the “imaginative” and the “actual” life, and Bell’s “significant form” are further manifestations of the closure effected around modernist art. These critics represent the legitimacy that photography aspired to. The invention of the “photographer of genius” is possible only through a disassociation of the image maker from the social embeddedness of the image. The invention of the photograph as high art was only possible through its transformation into an abstract fetish, into “significant form.”

With all this said, we can return finally to Lewis Hine. Hine stands clearly outside the discourse situation represented by *Camera Work*; any attempt to engage his work within the conditions of that discourse must necessarily deprive him of his history. While *The Steerage* is denied any social meaning from *within*, that is, is enveloped in a reductivist and mystical intentionality from the beginning, the Hine photograph can only be appropriated or “lifted” into such an arena of denial. The original discourse situation around Hine is hardly esthetic, but political. In other words, the Hine discourse displays a manifest politics and only an implicit esthetics, while the Stieglitz discourse displays a manifest esthetics and only an implicit politics. A Hine photograph in its original context is an explicit political utterance. As such, it is *immediately* liable to a criticism that is political, just as *The Steerage* is *mediately* liable to a criticism that is political.

Hine was a sociologist. His work originally appeared in a liberal-reformist social work journal first called *Charities and Commons* and then *Survey*. He also wrote and “illustrated” pamphlets for the National Child Labor Committee and eventually was employed by the Red Cross, photographing European battle damage after the First World War. I think it’s important to try, briefly, to define the politics represented by *Charities and Commons* and *Survey* during the early part of this century. The magazines represent the voice of the philanthropic agents of capital, of an emergent reformist bureaucracy that, for its lack of a clear institutional status, has the look of a political threat to capital. The publications committee included Jane Addams, Jacob Riis, and William Guggenheim. Articles were written by state labor inspectors, clergymen, prohibitionists, probation officers, public health officials, dispensers of charity and a few right-wing socialists and had such titles as “Community Care of Drunkards,” “Industrial Accidents and the Social Cost,” “The Boy Runaway,” “Fire Waste,” “Children and Industrial

Parasites,” “Strike Violence and the Public.” Politically the magazines stood clearly to the right of the Socialist Party, but occasionally they employed “socialist” polemic (especially in editorial

A photograph like *Immigrants Going Down Gangplank* is embedded in a complex political argument about the influx of aliens, cheap labor, ghetto housing and sanitation, the teaching of English, and so on. But I think we can distinguish two distinct levels of meaning in Hine’s photography. These two levels of connotation are characteristic of the rhetoric of liberal reform. If we look at a photograph like *Neil Gallagher, Worked Two Years in Breaker, Leg Crushed Between Cars, Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania. November, 1909*, and another like *A Madonna of the Tenements* we can distinguish the two connotations. One type of meaning is primary in the first photo; the other type of meaning is primary in the second.

Neil Gallagher is standing next to the steps of what looks like an office building. His right hand rests on a concrete pedestal, his left leans on the crutch that supports the stump of his left leg. About fifteen, he wears a suit, a cap and a tie. He confronts the camera directly from the center of the frame. Now I would argue that this photograph and its caption have the status of legal document. The photograph and text are submitted as evidence in an attempt to effect legislation. The caption anchors the image, giving it an empirical validity, marking the abuse in its specificity. At the same time, Neil Gallagher stands as a metonymic representation of a class of victimized child laborers. But the photograph has another level of meaning, a secondary connotation. Neil Gallagher is named in the caption, granted something more than a mere statistical anonymity, more than the status of “injured child.” Hine was capable of photographing child workers as adults, which may be one of the mysteries of his style of interaction with his subject, or it may be that these laborers do not often display “childish” characteristics. The squareness with which Gallagher takes his stance, both on the street and in the frame, suggests a triumph over his status as victim. And yet the overall context is reform; in a political sense, every one of Hine’s subjects is restored to the role of victim. What is connoted finally on this secondary level is “the dignity of the oppressed.” *Neil Gallagher*, then, functions as two metonymic levels. The legend functions at both levels, is both an assertion of legal fact and a dispensation of dignity to the person represented. Once anchored by the caption, the photograph itself stands, in its typicality, for a legally verifiable class of injuries and for the “humanity” of a class of wage laborers. What I am suggesting is that we can separate a level of *report*, of empirically grounded rhetoric, and a level of “spiritual” rhetoric.

This second type of rhetoric informs *A Madonna of the Tenements* in its entirety. This photograph appeared on the cover of *Survey*, in a circular vignette. A Slavic-looking woman sits holding her four- or five-year-old daughter. Another child, a boy of about nine, kneels at his mother's side with his left hand against his sister's side. The woman looks pensive; the daughter looks as though she might be ill; the boy looks concerned until we detect the suggestion of an encroaching smile in his features. The dress of the family is impoverished but neat; the daughter wears no shoes but the boy wears a tie. An unfocused wall-paper pattern is visible in the background. The overall impression is of a concerned and loving family relationship. In a sense, what is connoted by this image is the capacity of the alien poor for human sentiment. In addition, the image is invested with a considerable element of religiosity by the title, *Madonna*. That is, this woman and her family are allowed to stand for the purely spiritual elevation of the poor.

A passage in Judith Gutman's biography of Hine suggests his esthetic roots in 19th-century realism:

. . . he quoted George Eliot . . . as he spoke to the Conference of Charities and Corrections in Buffalo in 1909. . . . "do not impose on us any aesthetic rules which shall banish from the reign of art those old women with work-worn hands scraping carrots, . . . those rounded backs and weather-beaten faces that have bent over the spade and done the rough work of the world, those homes with their tin pans, their brown pitchers, their rough curs and their clusters of onions. It is needful that we should remember their existence, else we may happen to leave them out of our religion and our philosophy, and frame lofty theories which only fit the world of extremes. (Lewis W. Hine and the American Social Conscience, New York, 1967, p. 29.)

If Hine ever read an essay entitled "What Is Art?," it wasn't Croce's version, or Clive Bell's, but Tolstoy's:

The task for art to accomplish is to make that feeling of brotherhood and love of one's neighbor, now attained only by the best members of society, the customary feeling and instinct of all men. By evoking under imaginary conditions the feeling of brotherhood and love, religious art will train men to experience those same feelings under similar circumstances in actual life; it will lay in the souls of men the rails along which the actions of those whom art thus educates will naturally pass. And universal art, by uniting the most different people in one common feeling by destroying separation, will educate people to union and will show them, not by reason but by life itself, the joy of universal union reaching beyond the bounds set by life

. . . . *The task of Christian art is to establish brotherly union among men.* (*What Is Art?*, London, 1959, p. 288.)

Hine is an artist in the tradition of Millet and Tolstoy, a realist mystic. His realism corresponds to the status of the photograph as report, his mysticism corresponds to its status as spiritual expression. What these two connotative levels suggest is an artist who partakes of two roles. The first role, which determines the empirical value of the photograph as report, is that of *witness*. The second role, through which the photograph is invested with spiritual significance, is that of *seer*, and entails the notion of expressive genius. It is at this second level that Hine can be appropriated by bourgeois esthetic discourse, and invented as a significant “primitive” figure in the history of photography.

III

I would like to conclude with a rather schematic summary. All photographic communication seems to take place within the conditions of a kind of binary folklore. That is, there is a “symbolist” folk-myth and a “realist” folk-myth. The misleading but popular form of this opposition is “art photography” vs. “documentary photography.” Every photograph tends, at any given moment of reading in any given context, toward one of these two poles of meaning. The oppositions between these two poles are as follows: photographer as seer vs. photographer as witness, photography as expression vs. photography as reportage, theories of imagination (and inner truth) vs. theories of empirical truth, affective value vs. informative value, and finally, metaphoric signification vs. metonymic signification.

It would be a mistake to identify liberal and “concerned” documentary entirely with realism. As we have seen in the case of Hine, even the most deadpan reporter’s career is embroiled in an expressionist structure. From Hine to W. Eugene Smith stretches a continuous tradition of expressionism in the realm of “fact.” All photography that even approaches the status of high art contains the mystical possibility of genius. The representation drops away and only the valorized figure of the artist remains. The passage of the photograph from report to metaphor (and of photographer from reporter to genius) in the service of liberalism is celebrated in one of the more bizarre pieces on photography ever written. This is the enemy:

*[Strand] believes in human values, in social ideals, in decency and in truth. These are not clichés to him. That is why his people, whether Bowery derelict, Mexican peon, New England farmer, Italian peasant, French artisan, Breton or Hebrides fisherman, Egyptian fellahin, the village idiot, or the great Picasso, are all touched by the same heroic quality—humanity. To a great extent this is a reflection of Strand’s personal sympathy and respect for his subjects. But it is just as much the result for his acuteness of perception which finds in the person a core of human virtue and his unerring sense of photographic values that transmits that quality to us. It is all part of an artistic process in which the conception of form, the just balance of mass and space and pattern to frame, the richness of texture and detail transform a moment of intuition into an immutable monument. (Milton Brown in *Paul Strand: A Retrospective Monograph, The Years 1915–1968*, Millerton, N.Y., 1971, p. 370.)*

The celebration of abstract humanity becomes, in any given political situation, the celebration of the dignity of the passive victim. This is the final outcome of the appropriation of the photographic image for liberal political ends; the oppressed are granted a bogus Subjecthood when such status can be secured only from within, on their own terms.

— Allan Sekula