

Images, “real” People, and the Asylum

Are photographs transparent? When we view them are they passports to the moment they were taken, a sort of false realism of the past, frozen like Weegee’s street shots for us to be transported into an exotic time and place very distant from us. Are they a sort of visual freak show of the past? Or are we always projecting ourselves into every photograph, whether seemingly staged (Sally Mann), seemingly spontaneous (Cartier-Bresson), or seemingly fleeting (like Georges Anthiel’s objects laid upon a negative and exposed to light). What do we see when we confront abjection and horrors, the displacement and murder of people, reflected in the photograph, whether of the falling Spanish soldier captured in mid-air by Robert Capa in 1936 or those taken by Aris Messinis, an Agence France-Presse photographer, in 2016 of the dying and dead aboard the rescue boat Astral in the Mediterranean. Do we not give each photograph OUR own meaning?

Are photographs mirrors? Photographs deny the reality of empathy, a false emotion in all cases. Recently Yale psychologist Paul Bloom rejected empathy as a category as it is unlikely to lead to good moral outcomes. “I want to make a case for the value of conscious, deliberative reasoning in everyday life,” he writes in *AGAINST EMPATHY: THE CASE FOR RATIONAL COMPASSION*. “If you are struggling with a moral decision and find yourself trying to feel someone else’s pain or pleasure, you should stop.” Indeed does the viewing of a photograph, whether reflecting, as Bloom does

reading Walt Whitman's poetic experiences in the Civil War or even our viewing of sneezing pandas on the internet, mirror our own narcissism in the projective identification we have with what we see and the emotions we connect with them. They are in the end us.

The asylum photographs of the 19th century, so brilliantly reimagined by Michal Heiman, reflect her (and our) dealing with seeing difference in the past and projecting our own vulnerabilities into these images. She embodies in this exhibition, as she notes, the role of a gatekeeper to the past. Her physical presence in a dress evoking earlier times and places; the video images of a young woman, in a similar dress, entering into the metro, are means of signaling our distance from this past but also our heightened awareness of it. She does this by restructuring these earlier images, by "gradually employing even more strategies to enhance possibilities of gaining entrance; of accessibility." But can we ever really gain entrance?

Do we not always stand before every photograph as at a gate created only for us? Franz Kafka was right (as he usual is). We sit before the photograph on a stool for it allows us to sit down in front of it. There we sit for days and years. Finally our eyesight grows weak, and we do not know whether things are really darker around us or whether our eyes are merely deceiving us. We struggle and ask aloud: "Everyone strives to see the photograph," we say, "so how is that in these many years no one except me has actually tried to request to know its meaning?" Our gatekeeper sees that we are already dying (as we do perpetually and infinitely) and, in order to reach our diminishing sense of hearing,

he shouts at us, “Here no one else can gain entry into it, since this entrance into its meaning was assigned only to you. I’m going now to close it.” And it vanishes, offering us only the awareness that our meanings are our own and that seeing into the world means always examining our own internal wrestling with those emotions that provide meanings for us.

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