

Uncaring Camera

issues of morality in photography

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Photography in general received a "good press" throughout the wet-plate era, from the early 1850s to the 1880s. The profession was considered an honorable one; it was useful, enjoyable, and educational. Its applications to both the arts and the sciences were growing, and its public image was held in high esteem. Growing numbers of well-bred young ladies were entering the profession which was renowned for its lack of sexual discrimination, its rewarding of social skills, and its encouragement of the Victorian virtues of patience, tact, and enterprise. The photographic press never-faillingly upheld the respectability of the profession and berated those individuals, or aspects of the trade, which were inconsistent with good manners and a sense of social responsibility. The wet-plate photographer was generally considered to be a respectable member of society.

This image of respectability was quickly lost, never to be recovered, with the advent of the dry-plate and hand camera. Perhaps if we could have the history of photography all over again, we might decide that the conveniences of the instantaneous picture were outweighed by the trouble it caused; we might decide to stay with the cumbersome, messy, inconvenient wet-plate process. But that is a discussion for another occasion.

The fact remains that in all the essays and books on the history of photography in which the introduction of the hand camera is extolled, rarely, if ever, do they recount the social approbation and general distaste directed towards the snapshot. They might point out that the hand camera was scorned by most serious photographers; they do not point out that it was almost universally criticized by every intelligent non-photographer as a major social nuisance. They might discuss the large numbers of amateurs who entered the medium for the first time; they do not reveal that these snapshotters were generally derided as camera "fiends." They occasionally mention the competition for already dwindling markets between the professional and the amateur; they do not pursue the idea that the late 19th century amateur brought photography into such disrepute that it has taken nearly 100 years for the status of (some aspects of) the medium to recover.

To this date the history of photography had never experienced such a shock wave of change.

But *what* was it exactly to which people objected in snapshot photography that they had not opposed with earlier processes? The answer is straightforward: *for the first time people could be photographed surreptitiously*. Of course clandestine pictures had been made with wet-plates (notably in the case of photographing uncooperative prisoners), but these had been the exceptions, necessitating a great deal of prior planning. With the snapshot camera, anyone at any time could be the victim of an embarrassing or even incriminating picture. Sad to relate, the snapshot photographer knew and capitalized on this fact and it became the rage to capture the unposed person in awkward situations. The layman feared and hated the amateur with his ubiquitous camera. And the snapshotters ignored the restraints of common decency and good manners. The problem rapidly reached such proportions that for the first time the act of taking, or not taking, a picture was less an aesthetic consideration and more a moral or ethical one. All the endless debates about the photojournalist and his integrity (or lack of it) during the 20th century up to the present day have their roots in the uninhibited and unconstrained actions of the amateur of the 1880s. Issues were raised at this period which have never, and perhaps never will be, resolved due to the infinite varieties of motives from which pictures are made and of the complexities of personal integrity.

However, no discussion of the appreciation of photography would be complete without at least raising the thorny issues of ethics and integrity.

The plethora of photographs in our culture has swamped our critical faculties; we assume that every facet of life is fair game for the camera, if only to appease our curiosity for a mere second or two. Yet, when viewing photographs, it is valuable to stop and ponder for a moment not only the motives of the photographer but also our motives as onlookers. And it is certainly legitimate to question the tact, taste, good manners and integrity of the photographer when we are presented with the results of his/her behavior in the form of published or exhibited images.

Here is a short list of specific cases each one of which demonstrates an ethical question which could be hotly discussed by photographers and viewers of photographs.

1. A photographer was asleep next to his wife. The bedside telephone rang. He switched on the lamp, listened to the voice on the other end of the line, then asked the caller to "hold on" and placed the receiver on the table. He left the bedroom and returned with his camera. After taking an exposure reading, setting the controls and focusing on his wife, he woke her and told her the call was for her. He photographed her changes of expression and distress as she was told by the caller that her mother had just died.

Does this incident reflect an admirable commitment on the part of the photographer to record every aspect of life and not only its happier moments? Are we, as viewers of the photographs, made more aware of shared emotions, and therefore become increasingly humane by participating in the wife's grief? Or: is this a reflection of gross insensitivity on the part of the photographer who was callously intruding on his wife's grief merely to take a picture? Does such a picture force us to participate in an act of unfeeling voyeurism? Are there some aspects of life which are too personal to be photographed?

2a. During the last years of her life, Marilyn Monroe participated in a photographic session with the photographer Bert Stern - on the condition that she had control over which of the photographs could be published. Bert Stern agreed to this condition. After Monroe's death, many of the photographs which she did *not* want published were displayed in a major feature in Esquire magazine.

Did Monroe's death cancel the agreement and free all the photographs to be used for commercial gain by the photographer? Was our interest, as viewers, in the images more important than Monroe's wishes and a justification for the photographer breaking his word?

b. If either question prompted a "yes", then let us consider a similar case. Adolf Hitler never liked to be photographed while he was wearing spectacles. His personal photographer, Heinrich Hoffman, made many pictures depicting Hitler with glasses but never allowed these images to be released to the public. After Hitler's death, The Sunday Times published these previously censored photographs.

Was this a case of journalistic enterprise in which the public's "right to know" about a historical figure obviated any and all ethical considerations? Do we have less concern regarding this case, than in the identical case concerning Monroe, because of our lack of warmth towards the subject, and if so, is there one set of principles for "nice" people and a different set for "nasty" people?

3. Many photographers have become (in)famous for their determination and tenacity in hounding celebrities. An example is Ron Galella who became somewhat of a celebrity himself due to his unrelenting pursuit of Jacqueline Onassis. The paparazzi type of photographer has become a prominent aspect of the profession due to the insatiable demand of the public for images of the rich and famous in every conceivable situation.

Does an individual whose exploits, wealth or ability have given them public attention pay a fair price for such notoriety in their lack of privacy? Is it reasonable that the public's appetite for any and all images, no matter how trivial, of the famous individual can cause acute distress to that person?

4. There are religious and ethnic groups whose beliefs are opposed to the idea of being photographed. One example of such a sect is the Amish people of Pennsylvania, a farming community of Fundamentalist Christians whose faith dictates that image-making is sinful. They explicitly do not want to be photographed. Yet photographers constantly attempt to sneak pictures of these individuals without their knowledge, and photographers boast of their pictures taken at a distance with telephoto lenses aimed out of car windows, with a quick getaway before the subjects could react.

We are all curious and intrigued by customs, habits and lifestyles which differ from our own. Is curiosity a valid excuse for aiding and abetting a deliberate flouting of the subject's religious beliefs? Can it be argued that photography, by informing us of the dress, habits and customs of minority groups, is pulling the world closer to an ideal of the brotherhood of man? Or: are these photographs exploitive in that the photographer gains a reputation (and a pecuniary reward) by stealing images from a subject unwilling to give them?

5. An allied problem for both photographer and viewer is the fine dividing line between collaboration and exploitation. A subject may be willing to pose (or not object if later informed of an image taken unawares) yet find the ultimate use of the picture to be unfair, degrading or dishonest. This may not be the fault of the photographer who, for various reasons, may not have control over the context in which the image is used. Who, then, is to blame, if anyone?

Let us consider an even finer distinction between collaboration and exploitation in the hope of reaching a practical conclusion. Photographs of naked women are of consuming interest - and not only to males. Women's magazines also publish an inordinate number of female nudes which, in any other context, would be considered titillating, pandering to prurient sexual voyeurism, or even grossly exploitive. But that is another issue. The fact remains that all viewers are interested in the unclothed female body. Then why is there a difference between those that are degrading while others exude a sense of integrity?

Perhaps it is instructive to look for an answer to this question in the work of E. J. Bellocq (published under the title, Storyville Portraits) and comparing these photographs to any issue of, say Penthouse. On the face of it, Bellocq's nudes should be far more lascivious than the glamor girls in contemporary magazines in that he utilized as models the prostitutes in New Orleans' brothels rather than the wholesome girl-next-door types beloved of the erotic publications. A deeper look, however, reveals that Bellocq *knew and cared about* his subjects as individual people; his models collaborated with the photographer without any sense of exhibitionism because they knew Bellocq for a close and trusted friend. It shows. Bellocq photographed the women as warm human beings who merely happened to be in a state of (partial) undress - not as breasts and vaginas with incidental other anatomical appendages.

Perhaps this a conclusion. There is no substitute in photography for a loving, caring, knowledgeable empathy with the subject in front of the camera. And previously asked questions about the ethical nature of photography usually hinge on this fact. The rightness of a picture relies on the photographer's integrity which, in turn, relies on his/her caring understanding of the subject.

But this is not a guiding text aimed at telling the photographer what should or should not be photographed. The issue, however, does have a bearing on the understanding and appreciation of photographs by the intelligent viewer. Every photograph we view is held forever in our minds. We can never "un-see" it and forget that it existed. Along with the image itself our minds collect its

ambiance, flavor, sense of caring (or lack of it), connotations, context and a myriad of other impressions and feelings. Each photograph, then, conspires to affect and slightly alter our attitudes and ultimately our acts. The issue is important: do photographs we view "conduce to virtue", affirm and elevate our life-attitudes, strengthen the bonds between us or do they, in the words of one critic, "tempt us, by draining all human feelings from what we see, find first the world of others meaningless and then ourselves."?

Photography's power resides in its nature to ask such profound questions.

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