

Why Weegee was not a Westerner

or, the secret of successful landscape photography

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You can all relax: Einstein was right. Everything is relative, or relatively so. For example, the world was once much smaller. This is evident from a casual browse through any 19 century photographic journal where you will come across articles with titles like: "Photography in the Far West." Halfway through, you realize you are reading about a camera club in Chicago.

Today, the far West includes Hawaii, which is a good deal easier, and probably cheaper, to reach from New York than was Chicago one hundred years ago.

The ease of modern travel is a wonderful thing. It means that more people stay home, and remain abysmally ignorant of all other cultures, or even neighborhoods, but their own.

A recent survey found that half the respondents could not find America on a globe of the world. I find this fact singularly refreshing, because one activity guaranteed to limit the mind and confirm prejudice is to travel. (The answer, of course, as most Americans will agree, is to limit trips to foreign cities where there is already a McDonald's, in which you can spend the vacation with like-minded folks from Dubuque and bemoan the lack of ice-cubes in the water.)

There is a perversity in human nature which I find endearing. If it is easy, forget it; the more difficult, dangerous or inconvenient a practice, the more likely it is that people will hanker for it. Photographers are no exception.

When it was cause for prayers in the local church if a person contemplated travel to the next village, peripatetic photographers lugged half a ton of camera gear and glass plates all over Africa, the Far East, the American West and to every conceivable location where there was a good chance they would be scalped, stoned, eaten by dogs or pot-boiled. When plates had to be coated by hand, risking a lost limb through a collodion explosion, more photographers made more good pictures than in any other period in the medium's history.

Conversely, it is no coincidence that as soon as the completely self-contained, monkey-proof Polaroid system was introduced, photographers began, yet again, to reinvent the gum-bichromate process, because a) it took a long time b) it cost

more money c) it never worked satisfactorily and d) it always produced dumb pictures.

So, we have come full circle. Now that airlines are practically paying customers to fly to exotic places, photographers are staying indoors and building cutesy little arrangements with plastic soldiers, Barbie dolls and spacemen, which they then picture and show the results in museum exhibitions with arty titles like "Fabricated to be Photographed." This practice used to be called Table-Top photography and rightly earned the disgust of all right-thinking artists. I still remember the prize-winning classic of the genre. It depicted a squatting china dog, with a sorrowful look on its face and a puddle of water beneath its nether regions. It was called "Oops!" To some, it is debatable if Barbie dolls are much of an advance, but that is conservative thinking and rightly to be deplored by reactionary artist types.

Anyway, there will always be a few photographers who have outgrown playing with dolls and those who need to get out of the house in order to preserve domestic harmony. So what do they photograph, and where? Momentous questions indeed.

The risk-takers walk around the block, and chance being arrested as a pervert (more of this later) or, on sabbaticals, they drive to the city limits.

Now we are moving into the crux of the matter.

Because every photographic artist is reluctant to be thought perverted and, without exception, teaches at a university, and therefore works three days a week, nine months a year, this shamefully heavy workload only leaves sabbaticals in which to take pictures.

It is now obvious why photographers in the North-East photograph people and all things made of concrete while those in the South-West photograph deserts and mountains: because that is what you see outside the car window.

The astute among you will have realized that this should be the end of the article. Subject broached, issue clarified, point made, let's all go home.

But hold yer hosses, as they (or at least John Wayne would) say out West. I only get paid (do I get paid?) if I knock out the 2,000 words as demanded. That leaves 1,312 words to go. Actually, 1,305 counting the last sentence. Now it's 1,296... So let's add a little tinting to the cheek of this critical snapshot. Here are a few illuminating anecdotes, all of which contain a smidgin of truth, about the Westerner's fascination with the land and abhorrence of people.

Take my sister, for example. She lives in a typical rural village in England, wears sensible shoes, and regularly ponders the genetic defect in the family which led me to abandon the homestead. Her typical day is to walk her kids to school (three miles each way), then walk to the village store and carry home heavy shopping bags of groceries (two miles), and then walk to the school at teatime to collect the kids (another six miles). No sweat, as we Americans would so graphically put it. Recently she visited me in Arizona (in order to conduct personal research on the above genetic problem) and quaintly assumed that a brisk five mile walk before breakfast would be constitutional, in both senses of the word.

Within 20 minutes she was back at the door, red-faced between two police officers, who had picked her up for acting suspiciously in public. Walking. Only the mentally retarded and hookers acted in such a deviant manner, apparently. Of course, this experience confirmed her worst suspicions about America in general, and my aberration in particular - which only goes to prove my earlier contention about the prejudicial effects of foreign, or any other, travel.

It also shows why you cannot do street-life stuff in the West, as you can in the North-East.

This was the misguided notion of another visitor who is renowned for his gentle, witty photographs of ordinary people doing ordinary things in public. He asked to borrow my car in order to "get out and about," looking at life as Arizonans lived it. He was gone six hours, had driven 250 miles - and had not seen a single person outside a car. But he did see endless vistas of sand, scrub, cactus and rocks. Thereafter he had no trouble whatsoever in understanding why this area of the USA produces an ad nauseum output of landscape photographs. For a slice of life he had to content himself with the local tarantula races.

An unreasonable sense of fair play compels me to state that there is another type of landscape, used loosely, springing up in the sunbelt - the industrial estate. We are not talking about belching smokestacks or intestinal piping, which every photographer of the 1920s saw as the modern age's equivalent of the medieval cathedral, but about clean, geometric boxes, inside the stark exteriors of which electronic parts are assembled to flood the market with yet more useless digital things. Landscapes a la Lewis Baltz. Or, the photographer as sole survivor of a neutron bomb attack.

This is all familiar. But what may not be appreciated is that there was a baby-Baltz boom in Britain after the virus of New Topographies had crossed the Atlantic. This craze was as courageous as it was puzzling. For one thing, such buildings are as rare in England as pedestrians out West. In addition, once such a block has been erected it takes all of three weeks before it is begrimed by

sooty rain. Proving yet again that photographers are masochists, the young British Baltzer had to wait for clean-edged sunshine to rake the building. And I do mean wait. An American friend making his first trip to England, asked a taxi driver on the way out of the airport what the summers were like. "Great," he said, "last year it was on a Thursday."

I hosted a visit from a British N-T fan and drove him around the local industrial park, on which the sun shines 363 days a year. He shot his next exhibition through the side window of the moving car on one cassette of film in ten minutes.

I have explained how popular Western wisdom dictates that any pedestrian in public is likely to be a pervert, or at least up to no good. There is no reasoning with these people. Because they are obviously guilty, they take umbrage at being photographed doing it. The chances are high (how high? about as high as the fact that you will not get a Guggenheim in your lifetime) that a lawsuit will arrive at the darkroom before the print is dry.

This is discouraging. It also accounts for the fact that portraits resulting from outdoor encounters are becoming as obsolete as telephones with dials.

I recently photographed a typical deviant (one of my university colleagues) and showed the print to a photographer friend, who, if pressed, will admit he earns his living as a lawyer, but then we cannot all have an honest job. He took one look at the picture and said: "He'll sue." "Why," I asked. "Because you made him look like a Wimp." "But he is a wimp. Everyone says so. Even his mother." "Doesn't matter. If he thinks himself as Rambo you have offended his sense of self. It's called outrage in the law." So I tore up the print, and decided to concentrate on rocks and toy soldiers. As yet, they haven't figured out a way to sue.

My theory is that this is not such a big deal in the North-East. Meeting people (i.e. mutual interpersonal encounter situations) is so common that it is not an immediate concern for suspicion, alarm and flight. Anyway, New Yorkers are more likely to take direct action, like giving you a camera appendage where there was once a bodily orifice (i.e. negative mutual interpersonal encounter situations). But at least this sort of reaction has an intelligent response: when photographing you can dress like a NHL goalie. There's no defense against a lawsuit because, even if you win, the lawyer takes all your photo-equipment as a down payment on his fees, especially if you hire my friend.

Lest you think I jest about litigation mania, last year a young couple out West photographed their baby in its bath, and sent the film for processing. The lab blew the whistle to the Attorney General and the couple was prosecuted and convicted. The problem was that some of the nipper's naughty bits were showing. This seems unbelievable until you examine the faultless Western logic

behind this type of persecution: if everyone has it, or is doing it, the chances are it is beautiful and enjoyable - and therefore should be stamped out.

But I am straying into another article.

Suffice to say that photography, like pornography, is subject to community standards. The golden rule out West is this: if you do not generally see it out a car window, it is probably immoral or illegal; if you can see it out a car window, that's what the local photographs will look like.

You may be wondering why I have not mentioned the hairy-legged photographic brutes who hike into the wilderness with knapsacks on their backs, chewing jerky, communing with trees and cooing over suppurating fungi. I am well aware that these embarrassing types are particularly prevalent out West, but we try to ignore them. For one thing, they are disgustingly healthy, and wear shorts. For another, they have moved more than 100 feet from their cars, which is obviously An UnAmerican Activity. The final straw is that they make finely crafted prints and, therefore, cannot be considered true Artists.

The University Senate considered various strictures against these suntanned pinkos, such as: revoking parking places, banning them from washrooms where their bodies were reducing morale among us normal physical wrecks, and only allowing them to use the beginners darkroom next to the ceramic area where the students have to scoop gobs of clay from the developer between each print. One sadist even suggested defacing their copies of the zone system manual, but this was considered cruel and inhuman punishment.

The Senate wisely counseled that any such retaliation would only draw attention to them. Instead, it craftily suggested that they should be encouraged to "expand their horizons." Grants would be made available for this purpose. Such as travel abroad.

The hope was that they would forever wander in their lederhosen because they could not find America again.

This, needless to say, might increase the odds of a Guggenheim grant for the rest of us.

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