

Threshold - The Disturbing Image

a survivalist guide to contemporary photography

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Have you ever seen someone extinguish a cigarette in the remains of food? Now that is disturbing. It is unsettling, disgusting, offensive, sickening, shocking and downright repulsive. It is also fascinating, especially when accompanied by a sizzle followed by a whiff of burnt cabbage.

Yet this act, I presume, is not disturbing to the smoker. It is the same in photography. The image-maker is rarely disturbed by the production of a picture which disturbs its viewers. I do not know what that means except it serves to clear up an important point right from the start: photographers of disturbing pictures are not necessarily unkind, insensitive, callous, unfeeling or uncaring individuals whose willful perversion is to shock and cause discomfort to others - although they could be.

Therefore, this introduction to the disturbing image does not concern itself with the photographers' motives or lapses in good taste. It is concerned with the images themselves and some of the reasons why they gut-shoot us, no matter how sophisticated we might be as viewers of photographs.

We can begin, like well-trained little academics, by making some distinctions in definition (Before you discard this article, after reading the last sentence, I will quickly agree that academics have the disturbing tendency to take an interesting subject, such as the disturbing image, and then suck the juices of life out of it, dissect it into unrecognizable pieces, and kick around the carcass in a dreary, ritualized game. Take art history. What could be more interesting and exciting than the aspirations of painters in every age? What could be more dull than art history in academia? So bear with me. Once the premises are out of the way, we can move on to more exciting stuff).

First, there are two main definitions of the word "disturbing" which could be applicable in this context.

1. The image pushes the viewer to the limit of emotional acceptance. It produces anger, shame, shock and pain in degrees that eventually cause rejection. This is the

definition which is usually associated with disturbing images, and the one which will be given greater attention in the following words.

2. The image disturbs in the sense that it rocks the status quo and tends to break up the settled order of things. How this definition applies to photography will be discussed, briefly, at the end of the article.

We must also make a clear distinction within the first definition. (Here we go again). Images which disturb in that emotionally-shocking sense can be divided into two groups: a. those which are *generally* conceded to be shocking and b. those which are *personally* shocking.

1 a. Disturbing the evolutionary urge:

When we first think of "disturbing" images, it is a fair bet that the images which immediately spring to mind feature abnormality (mental or physical), sex or violence. These themes represent the tripod on which visual shock is based.

And that is understandable, even right and proper. The reason is this: The most disturbing subjects threaten our survival as a species. The fearsome triumvirate has been so deeply, genetically encoded, over half a million years of evolution, that we cannot escape its devastating implications. As with all animal species, the supreme, unwavering, incessant clamor of our instincts is to survive. Any threat to that urge will fill us with panic, even if that threat is only subtly sensed in the mild reflection of a photographic image. We are all programmed to respond to stimuli and the most extreme reaction occurs when the threat, even imagined, is to the continuance of the human race. If entropy is the universal law for all inanimate objects then its opposite is the rule for all living things. The evolutionary urge is to procreate, grow increasingly complex, adapt to the environment, and, in the case of humans, expand consciousness.

Abnormalities threaten our chances of finding a mate and contributing to the hardiness and survival-fitness of the race; sex, freed from procreation, offends a primitive biological need; violence reminds us of our vulnerability and impending death, and, by extension, the extinction of our species as a whole.

It sounds far-fetched and remote from the images on flat sheets of paper. I too, would have thought so. But the more I pondered the disturbing nature of so many images, it seemed the reason grew ever clearer. All those images, which were generally considered to be disturbing, were at odds with our evolutionary urges.

You do not need to be a Darwinian or an advocate of behaviorist psychology to see the beauty, or the sordidness in this argument.

The beauty is that we no longer have to come to terms with disturbing images; our reactions of shock, disgust and rejection are natural, understandable and to be applauded. Our repulsion is a healthy, vigorous form of self-defense. Conversely, an embrace of this imagery is a prelude to a dance with death.

The sordidness of the argument, however, is that we all share the same buttons which can be pushed in order to elicit a predetermined emotional reaction, ranging from a vague uneasiness to active rage. The exploiters among us have discovered our buttons and push them with glee, voyeuristically congratulating themselves as we squirm to order.

Sex and violence, it hardly needs reminding, are the staple ingredients of practically all novels, movies and television series and specials. The interesting question here is why the majority of viewers are not only willing to submit themselves to such predictable lust and carnage but actively seek it, like lemmings who cannot wait for the looming cliff-edge of extinction. The answer, I think is twofold. We do not have much choice. Ours is a capitalist, consumer-oriented society, for good and ill. And anxiety sells. An anxious, disturbed, unsettled viewer or reader makes for a good consumer. Through disturbing images we are being manipulated. The other reason why we actively embrace emotional disturbance is a bit more philosophical; the closer we can approach a survival threatening situation, even vicariously through an image, without actually succumbing, then the more alive we feel. Photography (and film) allows us to approach the cliff-edge without physical risk. We can play Russian roulette with a fictional silver bullet.

These preliminary ideas deserve a great deal more words, although they will serve to open the debate, *Tempus*, however, *fugit*, and we must press on.

1b. Disturbing a personal angst:

Even if the preceding argument is tentatively accepted as a working hypothesis, it does not explain why some individuals will be gravely (an appropriate word) disturbed by specific images while others will be left immune. It also fails to explain the shift in what-is-disturbing over the passage of time or to explain the image which would be regarded as generally disturbing in one culture but neutral in another.

The generalized argument should be considered as the background noise, the hum of

traffic, against and within which individual songs are sung. Viewers reacting to disturbing images might not be, seldom are, consciously aware of the issues of survival but that does not mean the "noise" does not exist, intermingling with and distorting the personal voices. When we begin to locate and identify personal reactions to disturbing images we find, yes, a disturbing, fact.

The images which disturb particular individuals are rarely located in a fixed band of the photographic spectrum or associated with a particular subject matter or identified by the identical reaction from a similar group of viewers. When we move from the general to the specific a new set of factors seems to emerge. In the personal category we must abandon a fixed root-cause of the disturbance and think of disturbing images as a multitude of pulsing circles, moving randomly and horizontally at various speeds across the whole arena of photographic expression, as well as vertically throughout the culture, while shifting in size and location as time passes. There is no single static circle to locate, fix in position, and measure.

Personal responses are exactly that: personal. To indicate what I mean, it is necessary for me to become personal on occasion. Not that my reactions are particularly interesting, and they are certainly not exemplary, but because they are immediately accessible they will, I hope, act as examples of the factors which alter the degree of disturbance, with reference to specific images.

One photograph which constantly emerges in any discussion of disturbing images is "Chicken Entrails", 1939, by Frederick Sommer. I would agree that it is a powerful, beautiful photograph but it is not, to me, in the least bit disturbing, and for a logical reason. The subject is so familiar that it holds no special strangeness. I paid my way through school by working in a slaughter house/butcher shop; I hunt and am surrounded by neighbors who hunt, and the act of gutting and skinning is merely a chore; I keep chickens for meat as well as eggs and chicken entrails are a familiar sight, and always have been. It is a recurring surprise when urban visitors to my cabin in the woods are repulsed by the sight of blood and guts. I am not making judgments or apologizing; merely indicating that it is unlikely that we will be disturbed by an image of a familiar subject.

The disturbing image is inevitably of an exotic, unusual scene, removed from our day-to-day experience. It reminds me of a photographer friend who, on a visit to India, pictured a washed-up bloated corpse being ravaged by wild dogs, with the pristine beauty of the Taj Mahal in the background. The image was definitely disturbing. Although it was widely published in the West, no Indian journal would use it - because it was such a familiar, prosaic scene, of no interest to anyone.

An important point should be injected into the discussion at this stage. This journal's readers are particularly prone to being disturbed by a wide range of images. Educated, comparatively affluent, middle-class Americans have become so comfortable, thank God, in their ascendancy over hand to mouth survival that they are more easily disturbed and shocked by the raw crudity of life outside fortress USA, or even within it, if the forces of disaster threaten their prosperity and well-being. It is as well to bear in mind that the vast majority of images which we find disturbing would have not the slightest emotional appeal to the vast majority of people in the rest of the world. But that again is another issue. Back to the *personal* reasons why some images disturb more than others. Individual experiences not only anesthetize us to certain images but also highly sensitize us to others.

For a publishing project I wanted to reproduce a series of photographs by Duane Michals called "Homage to Balthus", in which a woman undresses while a passive, seated man watches. It is not a salacious group of images by any stretch of the imagination. However the publisher's reaction was extreme and adamant. Under no circumstances would those images appear in any publication in which he was associated. A curious, but in the light of his explanation, a most reasonable reaction. These images were particularly disturbing to the publisher because he was a Hungarian Jew and associated Michals' images with the forcing of Jewish girls into prostitution by the Nazis. The association was so strong that he could not even bear to look at them, although it is unlikely that Duane Michals was intending to so disturb a viewer in this particular way.

We all have trained Dobermans in our heads, waiting to savage us if our thoughts step out of line. Sometimes we are not aware of the original "order" which provoked the savaging. While I was editing Creative Camera I received a furious letter from a woman who canceled her subscription because I had dared to publish a blatantly pornographic image which was disgusting in the extreme. Puzzled, I was anxious to ascertain which particular image had provoked such outrage. It was "Two Shells", 1927, by Edward Weston.

This example only goes to show that almost any photograph could be disturbing to someone, at some time. (The irony is that Weston would not have been surprised by the woman's reaction because several friends had already commented that the image "stirred up all my innermost feelings so that I felt a physical pain", and, "they contain. . . the morbidity of a sophisticated, distorted mind," and yet another friend used the specific word "disturbing" to describe the print, and that he felt "weak at the knees. ")

Edward Weston's photograph began its life as a disturbing image, was canonized, sanitized and legitimized as Art, and found a later viewer, on a different continent, who was again profoundly disturbed by it.

And sex is always a predictable source of image disturbance. It is such a deeply-rooted animalistic urge modified by an infinite number of personal experiences and cultural training, not to mention manipulations, that every individual possesses raw wounds just waiting for the salt of certain imagery. To illustrate my meaning, consider the fact that John Ruskin could never consummate his marriage to Effie, once he had seen her in the nude. Ruskin had seen plenty of nudes in his life - but only the idealized Greek statuary which unmarried artists were encouraged to copy. And what was the distinguishing factor of these marble heroines? They were devoid of pubic hair. Their legs met at a smooth slice of cheddar cheese. When Ruskin noticed that Effie was naturally hirsute, it so offended his idealized sensitivity that he was profoundly revolted. The hairy animal was lurking within the pure goddess.

We all harbor personal fears of a like nature which find expression in the imagery of others. We also search out the images which disturb us, in the same way that we obsessively pick at a scab. One of the most profoundly disturbing photographs I have ever seen was projected by A. D. Coleman during a lecture on the "Grotesque in Photography". It depicted a beautiful young woman, eyes closed, naked, languorously and vulnerably stretching as if in post-coitus satisfaction. How utterly desirable! Then, with slight disturbance, I noticed the long line of stitches down her abdomen - and Coleman explained that she was a cadaver, photographed after an autopsy. I was, indeed, disturbed - as much for my secret wish to make love to a corpse as for the pity of a young life prematurely ended and for the unfamiliar sight of a death stripped of its newspaper voyeurism.

What is particularly significant about this example, however, is the importance of Coleman's *explanation*. Words were required before the disturbance of the image was received with full power. We constantly need reminding that photographs are not narrative in function, and when asked to perform in this role they need words. In fact an important point must be stressed: the source of much disturbance in photography is created by the words which accompany the image -with the image making the words up-close, real and actual.

A good example is the innocuous still-life taken by Shomei Tomatsu and reproduced in Max Kozloff's Photography and Fascination (p. 174). On first encounter it appears to be an artfully contrived "study" (with, I might add, striking visual similarities to "Chicken Entrails".) The explanation is that it is a prosaic record of a beer bottle distorted by the

searing heat of the atomic explosion over Hiroshima. Only with the release of that specific information does the image become profoundly disturbing.

And this point brings up another factor in the causes of image disturbance: symbolism. Every image causes our brains to leap alive, with synapses clicking, along infinitely complex circuits. When the end of the electron trail is a latent memory then the result is emotional disturbance. I once walked past a doll factory outside of which was a table of spare limbs. As I bent over the doll parts, fiddling with exposure and framing, a frail old man stopped and wheezed over my neck. When the (bad) picture had been taken, he tapped me on the shoulder, explained he was a World War I veteran, pointed to the heap of limbs and said "That's what it was like at Verdun!"

Dolls as symbols of people, of course are commonly used emotional triggers within the traditions of photography, and no less effective for that, as witnessed by the works of Vilem Kriz, Hans Bellmer and many others.

Personal responses to images are so variable that no explanation will satisfy our desire for a conclusion. The temptation is to relate case after case after case in the hope that sheer quantity will yield The Answer. Why, for example, did a .45 pistol-toting viewer kidnap a 13 year old boy and demand, as ransom, the removal of four prints by Les Krims from the walls of a Memphis Academy of Arts in March 1971? The images were so disturbing that they drove a man to crime, and caused the photographer to fear for his own life.

Most of us do not respond to such imagery with action, but by mental withdrawal, with emotions more akin to embarrassment than anger. I feel this way when confronted by the recent rash of photo-autobiographies, which reveal the most intimate details of the photographer's relationships with family, friends and lovers and their own bodies. I resent being forced, manipulated, into an uneasy sense of intrusion, of callously voyeuristic complicity. How dare they make me feel so uncomfortable!

But few of my colleagues seem to share my distaste for a stranger's intimacies, so I am forced into accepting that my reaction is *personal* and leads me into asking myself personal questions about the source of my disturbance. In that sense all disturbing images *can be* therapeutic and thereby valuable.

There is no doubt that deliberately disturbing images are in the ascendancy right now. It is inevitable; a reverse swing of the pendulum after a few years of New Topographic style objectivity, of cool, noninvolved, unemotional, author-less images. Predictably, the swing is towards the opposite: feverishly hot subject matter charged with dervish

emotionalism by an idiosyncratic author.

Where will this lead and are there limits to acceptable subject matter? As your editor asked, Where are the boundaries? The assumption in such questions is that imagery is pushing outwards and that which is acceptable today would not have been tolerated yesterday. I do not subscribe to this theory. Shocking, disturbing imagery merely moves around the circumference in order to keep as far away as possible from the convention of the day. It is antiauthoritarian, radical and subversive. As the conventions of society move closer, so the disturbing image retreats, keeping the "acceptable" at a diagonal opposite.

Here is a good example of what I mean. In the 19 century the church held a dominance in societal values. Therefore, some of the most disturbing images, to the Victorians, were those that offended religious notions. A most shocking image depicted an actress against the light, and "the glory round her head is giving great offense". It was a "blasphemous" image because the woman was aping the Virgin Mary! It is impossible to imagine mere backlighting being so disturbing in our own secular society. Perhaps Joel-Peter Wilkin is fortunate in that his photographs have clashed with a Conservative political trend. . .

It is also curious that images which were not considered disturbing in the 19 century have since become so. Post-mortem photographs, for example. Today, I venture to say, they are considered rather shocking and brutal in their casual depiction of death. Yet, when made, they were objects of affection. *Tempora mutantur.*

Times are, indeed, changing - and the nature of what disturbs changes with them.

2. Disturbing the status quo

Another definition of disturbance is to break up the settled order of things. A brief note should be made of the application of this definition to photography. It will be very "brief" because the thrust of this issue is towards the former, more accepted, usage of the word.

Photographers, like all other specialists, cherish the traditions of their field of expertise. New departures create cracks in the shell and signal a period of vulnerability and anxiety. Paul Strand produced such cracks with his brutally direct portraits in 1917, images which cocked a snoot at pretty pictorialism, signaling a conflict epitomized by the verbal battles between Ansel Adams and William Mortensen during the 1930s. Robert Frank disturbed the status quo in The Americans, not only by disregarding the

formal etiquette of Henri Cartier-Bresson but also by injecting existentialist despair into the images of affluent, self-satisfied America of the 1950s. Bill Brandt's Perspective of Nudes was also almost universally condemned when it was first published.

After several decades of photography dominated by the "straight" image, Jerry Uelsmann created a disturbance in the medium with his fantasy blends of the 1960s. At the same time Lee Friedlander and Garry Winogrand were also shaking the visual conventions of the decade with their own idiosyncratic images.

There are many, many other examples. It is impossible to impress on young photographers just how disturbing were the photographs of these individuals when first made because, of course, the images have been encompassed by a new shell and the authors accepted into the pantheon of picture-pioneers.

The point is this: all the innovative image-makers have this tendency to rock the boat in which we feel so comfortable, huddled together with our peers. They disturb the settled order of things - before we let them in the boat and, once again, feel safe, until some other individual starts shaking the vessel.

In this sense, disturbing images are to be welcomed, although it is often difficult to ascertain the cause of the photographs' offensive nature. If they merely disturb the medium's status quo, they will be quickly accepted by the photographic community.

Postscript:

I have tried to indicate that disturbing images are inevitable - and that they are always healthy. Even those which fill us with disgust and abhorrence can indicate that we care about moral values, that we are part of an upsurge in human consciousness. They act, paradoxically, as indicators of the state of our society; they are part of the negative-positive essence of art. Those which disturb us personally can be keys to unlock areas of individual sensitivity, to be cherished or rejected as appropriate. Images which unsettle us as photographers can be viewed as signals that the medium is vigorous and energetic no matter how much we loathe them personally.

While images still have the capacity to disturb us, I have hopes for both the human race and the medium of photography.

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