

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

A Thirst for Seeing

Maurice Amiel · Wednesday, September 2nd, 2020

Between two depressions

Let us call a cat a cat ... we are all these days in a state of relative depression, cheated, by public safety necessity, of satisfying social contacts *from seeing one another as abstractions of ourselves, at a safe distance.*

The other depression was of course the Great Depression with catastrophic economic and social consequences and into which the late Walker Evans started his photographic journey, as he describes it, “(*in* the street, (*which*) ... *allowed me ... to quell a thirst for seeing.*”

The feature image ...

... was taken by Evans in 1928-29 in New York and is included here as example of his early street photography *tending toward abstracted parts of things or people that were to prod the viewer into wondering: What is that thing? What is it part of? Who are the people? What are they part of?*

A thirst for seeing

The following images are taken from the opus of Evans work, in the introductory chapter dealing with so called “abstractions,” *half way between representation and creative composition ... a seeing stance that came to characterize all his work.*

I have selected three pairs of images that illustrate that stance in interesting manner.

The stair as publicity panel ... and the view from the top

In the first image the repetition of the Baking Powder message seems at times to be on a flat surface when isolated from its context, only to find it's three dimensions when considering the shadow of the handrail jogged at each step of the stair.

In the second image, whether at the top of a stair, or from a top floor window, people on the street

below appear as a suite of abandoned things around the manhole cover ... again it is their shadows that gives their three dimensions away.



the advertising stair-panel



The view from above

The lady in the sidewalk crowd ... the one next to a newspaper stand

Both are intent on seeing or being seen.

The way Evans frames the first, her head turned away from the direction the sidewalk crowd is moving and covered by a hat that only allows a hair lock to show, has a dual expression of disregard for the men around her and perhaps of muted tight-lipped intent on being noticed.

The lady in the second has all the trappings of an intellectual with newspaper tucked under her arm, her large round eyeglasses, fedora looking hat and tight-lipped determined facial expression, is probably leaning forward in an effort to see ... something? Someone?



The lady in the sidewalk crowd



The lady by the newspaper stand

The visual and the aural haranguing

In the first image, centrally located in the middle of what appears to be a building site, the written message could well be a political one: WE ARE BUILDING ... A NEW ... AND GREAT ... BLOOMING (DALE)!

The juxtaposition of the real and the painted construction elements adds to the multiplicity of message sources and perceptual channels put to the task of seeing and reading.

The second image does not present such multiplicity of sources of information; the crowd is densely pressed around a speaker on a raised platform with one arm and hand raised and index finger dramatically pointing forward to show something located behind the crowd, or to stress a point being made in his speech?

The fact that the crowd is probably blocking the traffic may indicate a situation of labor dispute and a call for a strike ... yet far from constituting a mob scene!



The visual haranguing



The aural haranguing

Discussion

The last image, below, shows the **complete mastery of the craft** by Evans in the *false impression of movement of the convertible car* produced by the leaning back posture of the young woman, as if pulled back by the lurching car, and the “*filé*” effect on the car passing by in the **rear due to slow shutter speed and not by the panning of the camera needed to keep the would be moving convertible in focus.**

The car in the rear is in fact the only moving vehicle in the image, since the convertible is actually parked.

Evans will move on develop those skills in all the tragic ambiguity of ordinary farmers he photographed ***in noble stances but dressed in rags*** due to the Great Depression economic catastrophe and the environmental one of the Dust Bowl.



Crafting movement

Credit

All images are taken from the opus of Evans’ work titled

La soif du regard, by Gilles Mora and John T. Hill, and published by Seuil, Paris, in 1993

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