

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Photography: A Way of Seeing

Maurice Amiel · Wednesday, November 18th, 2020

Foreword

My practical experience with photography, my familiarity with its canon and basic reading on its specificity as a visual art form, bring me to the conclusion that it is a *particular way of seeing*.

By that I mean that when looking at the ground glass of the camera, the photographers must be sensitive to, and be a judge of, the quality of three elements:

- **Light** that embodies the *visual structure* of the image
- **Details** that provide for *visual focus* and give *depth to the image*
- **Composition** that contributes to its *expressivity*

The feature image ...

... reprised below, was taken by E. Boubat in 1954 and is an iconic example that shows mastery of the photographic way of seeing:

- **Light is differently modulated** on each of the three horizontal bands that *visually structure the image in a foreground, a middle and a background*
- **Details** in each of these visual bands that provide *differentiated visual focus for depth perception*
- **Composition** key element of the trees, *visually echoing the row of walking beguines, and expressing the quiet order of life in a religious community.*



Boubat: the “béguinage” of Bruges, Belgium 1954

The photographers ...

... whose work shows a mastery of the photographic way of seeing I wish to discuss in this post,

are part of a personal canon of sorts:

– **John Loengard and Paul Strand** for their understanding of *the qualities of light* in rendering subjects

– **Edward Weston and Wright Morris** for their attachment to *details and form* in natural and man-made subjects

– **Henri Cartier-Bresson and Robert Doisneau** for their sensitivity to the *expressive effects of composition*

The photographs ...

... were selected on condition that *one particular element of the photographic way of seeing, would be dominant in defining their visual quality, while harmonizing with the others.*

– **The element of light** and visual structure:



Loengard: O'Keefe with rock collection, Abiquiu 1966



Strand: Kindergarten window at Luzzara, ca 1955

In both images the area of greatest light-dark contrast attracts our attention, as it should, since it contains the image subject.

These areas demand a counterpoint which differs in that Strand surrounds the area of contrast with one of more subdued light, while Loengard literally covers the entire image with the soft shadows of an overhead trellis.

In the Strand image the visual structure underscores a narrative of inside vs outside ... of constraining security metal bars vs liberating garden planting.

In the Loengard image the visual structure underscores a narrative of comfort seeking under desert midday heat.

– **The element of details** and perception of form and depth



Weston: Dunes at Oceano, 1936



Morris: White barn, Connecticut 1940

Both Weston and Morris have used large format plate negatives allowing for great detailing giving body to the forms of the subject and depth to the visual field.

This can be seen in Weston treatment of the foreground of the image where every crease and fold of the sand dunes can be seen, while further up the image the dune surfaces smooth out visually while retaining their individual form due to tonal differences.

Morris treatment of the barn building reveals every joint between the wood planks, every nuance of the concrete foundation surface, every blade of grass at the lower edge of the foundation and every detail of the roof edge at the top.

The barn takes the allure of a sculpture set over rolling hills under a distant cottony cloudy sky.

– **The element of composition** and expressive value



Doisneau: Walkway over the steam, Villeneuve-St Georges, 1945



Cartier-Bresson: Seville, Andalusia, Spain 1933

The inverted **V** of Doisneau's image composition leads the eye to the horizon where it disappears under a cloud of smoke from coal burning locomotives, while the signal-bearing tower reaches to the sky giving a hint of the great distances travelled by trains, and of the need for their conductor to read those signs from far away.

The size of the lone person on the walkway effectively expresses the contrast between human and machine that Doisneau sought most probably to illustrate in the image.

At the opposite end of environmental scale this narrow Seville street was rendered by Cartier-Bresson in all its exiguity, with patches of dark shadows at each building corner producing the effect of an even narrower path.

Were it not for the presence of the boy at the right-hand corner of the image, its visual composition could easily be confused with an abstract painting, which expresses something of the artistic spirit of the time.

End words

I hope the images and comments provided in this post have made it clear that photography, as a visual art medium, entails a poetic way of seeing, above and beyond the technical ability of film, camera and chemistry to "write with light".

Credit and bibliography

The photos and their captions were taken from the following books:

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Zavattini, C. and Strand, P. *UN PAESE – Portrait of an Italian village*, Aperture Foundation Inc., N.Y., 1997

and:

PHOTO #2 HS – SPECIAL EDOUARD BOUBAT, Juillet-Août 1999

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