Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Reading two old posed photographs

Maurice Amiel · Wednesday, September 25th, 2019

Foreword

In his "Petite histoire de la photographie," Walter Benjamin discusses the expressive and representational dimensions of photography and quotes the art historian Alfred Lichtwark's opinion, expressed in 1907, that *"There is not, in our time, a work of art that we would contemplate with as much attention as a photograph of ourselves, our family members and friends, and of those we love."*

Much of this is based, in my opinion, on the two basic values of photographs: their ability to **memorialize** a moment-situation-event and, **to provide cues** to the identity-character-status of the people in them so that the viewer can **read and relate** to them.

This reflection brings me to two photographs, kept in a family album, I wish to discuss here in those terms.

Around the bar mitzvah table

The feature image, reprised below, shows a group of guests, family and friends, surrounding my mother proudly standing by her "petits pains."

Around the bar mitzvah reception table

Without this photograph, I would not have remembered today the particular way my mother took front and center, while I stood behind her, and how friends-classmates-boy scout buddies would outnumber family members … all eager to partake of the food, as one of my friends doing it already, quite naturally, off-camera like.

The unfamiliar reader may try to differentiate family from friends based on personal criteria, or even to find me in their midst, but he or she will surely be able to read my mother's pride and place in making the spread in front of us and our eagerness to partake of it, seeing each of us holding a paper plate!

The bar mitzvah boy

Benjamin's historical essay is followed by his "reading" of a studio photograph of Franz Kafka as a boy, standing in the middle of a gathering of studio props and holding a military type stick, while

looking to the side, and not to the camera, in a bemused way.

*The point Benjamin makes is that the **"attitude"** of the young Kafka is what expressed his "poor and brief childhood," as Kafka himself characterized it in a short story toward the end of his life.*

What attitude do I read in the following portrait photograph of myself?

Two hands, two ankles and shod feet, one neck and head sticking out of a fancy "golf suit" made of British wool fabric, still bearing the chalk marks made by the tailor on the fabric around the pockets, make me look like a *fashion mannequin.*

Tie and pocket kerchief complete the newly acquired status of bar mitzvah boy I seem to be mildly happy about, in spite of the *physical weight of the suit, probably a metaphor for the newly acquired status and responsibilities.*

My mannequin-like attitude seems to fit well with the heavy dark furniture behind me, with the flower bouquet in the vase on top of it, and with the clear "representation" intent of the image … what of exactly if not of a certain formality and social standing.

End Words

The bar mitzvah day's event, sixty-six years ago this October, started in the morning with my reading a portion of the bible, accompanied by my father, in the midst of the assembled males of the community I was now to be ritually part of.

In the afternoon we hosted the older family members, aunts mostly, who were served my mother's famous candied orange peels and the middle eastern traditional cool glass of water and coffee, in *the informal apartment entry hall.*

In late afternoon was the reception for friends and cousins as shown in the feature image taken in *the formal dining room.*

The morning and afternoon events were not photographed and are visually skimpy in my memory … sadly so, since it would have been quite moving for me to read into their faces and their attitudes and relate to their expressions.

*As some perspicacious 20th century artists have noted, **the life of any work of art is imbedded in its relation to the viewer**.*

Credit photos to an unknown commercial photographer

Bibliographic note

Barthes, Roland : *Camera Lucida*, Hill and Wong, N.Y., 1981

Benjamin, Walter: *Petite histoire de la photographie*, Payot, Paris, 2019 (Original publication date 1934)

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