

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Snapshots and Society

Maurice Amiel · Wednesday, August 12th, 2020

Definition

The best definition of a **snapshot** is the one given of **photography** by the famous French *snapshot artist* Jacques-Henri Lartigue:

*“Photography to me Is catching a moment which is passing, and which is **true**”*

I would simply add: ***true to the nature of the subject**, as in the feature image taken by Lartigue and reprised below.*



Boys at the beach

Production

The **conventional “snapshot taker”** is an *amateur*, using a *simple camera*, documenting persons, places and events, in order to preserve the resulting images, *chronologically*, to serve as support to an intergenerational memory ... unless they fall in disarray in the public realm, through random discarding, estate sale, etc.

In contrast, the **“snapshot artist”**, such as J-H. Lartigue or E. Erwitt, is in a position to exhibit his work or have it published because of its level of *technical mastery*, *visual sophistication* and *socio-cultural historical pertinence*.

Corpus

I will discuss examples from *the published work of Elliot Erwitt, under the title of “Snapshots”*, *because he is our contemporary*, *because of his particular sense of humor* and *because he has presented his work in categories of subjects to help the viewer decode their truth.*

In the context of today’s exacerbated *state of racial relationships*, I have selected *three significant categories*, and limited myself to *two photos per category*. These have been chosen for their historical value and for their sensitive treatment of the subject.

“Reading” ...

... because Erwitt asks of us to read, or decode, textual as well as non-verbal signs having social and cultural connotations.

The segregated access to a “beer parlor” dating of 1949 in New Orleans

In this snapshot we notice that the painted sign signifying the location of the “colored entrance” has faded contrasting with the one advertising the quality of JAX beer served in that drinking venue.

Were it not for the couple **slightly bent and slowly walking by the signs in the shadowy part of the street**, the image would not so clearly communicate the painful experience of being socially and spatially segregated ... in 1949 America.



Passing by a Colored Entrance sign

The “Griffin Allwite” advertising sign in an African-American neighborhood train station, dating of 1948 in New York city.

This image would not require a comment were it not for the needed observation of *the relaxed body language of the man leaning on the sign, and the congenial grouping of the other travelers that lead us to “read” the waiting travelers as being most probably of African-American descent ... hence the socially paradoxical sign that was clearly the reason for Erwitt to take that snapshot.*



Waiting for the train by an “off color” sign

“Standing” ...

... because of the situations Erwitt has discovered, that qualify the simple fact of standing, depend on one’s “place” in society.

The seated woman in a dancing café, dating of 1961 in Brasilia, Brazil

In this capital city and at that date it is not strange to have an integrated clientele having a drink and dancing to live music.

Being an African-Brazilian woman and alone is more the reason for that expression of not-quite-being-in-the-right-place, wondering if someone will ask her to stand up and dance, milling in the crowd.

The African-Brazilians being not as well socially integrated as, for instance, the African-Cubans, *this expression of doubt of real social acceptance is probably worth a snapshot* ... to offer to the American public in that historic period of civil rights strife.



Waiting doubtfully to be asked to dance

The “pillars of African-American labor” dating of 1954, on the waterfront of Hoboken, New Jersey

I have borrowed the expression of “ pillars of African-American labor” from Faith Noelle Auoun post in the Aug. 5th issue of CW: <https://www.culturalweekly.com/the-western-pillar-of-african-american-labor/>

It is not surprising that the standing people in the line-up of dock workers waiting for their pay check, or for clocking in a work day unloading the ship in the background, are all of African-American descent ... free men perhaps but still in the social economic posture of exploited labor hands.

I will only make a passing remark about how the bottom half of the snapshot is quite dark as opposed to the brightly lit top half.



Line up of dock workers

“Playing” ...

... because of the situations Erwitt has uncovered, *qualify the social racial context of playing in a most touching way*

Gee look at that ! ... dating of 1997 in Kissimmee, Florida

There is some envy mixed with timidity as the African-American children in regular attire watch a European-American child in doll’s attire pass by.

Erwitt does not provide any clue as to context only the bare fact that while European-American children can afford to play at being expensively dressed dolls, their African-American counterpart must satisfy themselves with simpler pleasures.



Gee ... look at that!

No comment ... dating of 1951 at Fort Dix, New Jersey

... except to note that this image, in the book, comes right after the preceding one.

Thanks to intelligent book editing I think the message is clearly communicated!



No comment

Discussion

I suppose the main difference between the family-album-orientation of the amateur snapshot taker and the socially-conscious one of the snapshot artist, is indeed the subtle message imbedded in the latter's work.

In that respect the work of Erwitt, as the one of Lartigue, is timeless.

Credit

The feature image is taken from the front cover of a 1993-94 agenda, published by *Oberthur* and featuring some images by J-H Lartigue

All other images are taken from *Elliott Herwitt – Instantannés*, published by Phaidon, 2011, Paris (with an introductory essay by Murray Sayle)

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