

## A Brief Dialogue Between a Philosopher and a Photographer in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

*The photographer began.*

*8/2/18 to 8/11/18*

Dear friend,

You recently said something in passing to me that has continued to come to the forefront of my thought periodically since then. Perhaps I can address it, in some small part, here.

There are three typically heard errors made by many who attempt to read poetry aloud. One is common to both poetry and prose reading, and is heard as relatively unmodulated, and arbitrarily modulated, monotonous delivery, lacking expression. Another is the breaking of speech at the end of each line, often combined with a sing-song attachment to the meter, at the expense of continuing thoughts and of the meaning overall. Finally, in contrast with both of these, is the reading resulting from the attempt to imbue a majority of words with undue importance and thus, in the effort to convey the misplaced poetic power, to give undue emphasis to too many words, dissolving the author's music into another kind of undifferentiated confusion, in which emphasis becomes meaningless.

This is not to say, of course, that reading poetry well, necessarily comes easily. But one needs to know what to look for and, more importantly, how to look for it.

Analogous problems may be found in the domain of painting, and we should probably use oil painting as our reference, due to the rich potential it holds for articulation through color, blending, form, layering and glazing, and, in some cases, relief and the play of light thereon. While a small brush in the right hand can render astonishingly fine detail, which may serve good purpose, another artist may attain the means to create the illusion of such detail with a larger instrument, an illusion that, ironically, vanishes the more closely it is examined and reappears as it regains distance. In either case, just as one can pick out all the letters, or syllables, of a poem and learn nothing of what the poem holds, the actual, or illusionistic appearance of, detail in a painting, has meaning only in the context of the composition as a unity. In the hands of a master, unity pervades concept and execution, and lawfully connects everything from the least brushstroke to painting's entirety.

So it is, also, in great Classical music, where the unheard, single idea waits silently to be perceived from between the notes, or from behind the notes, of the written, or performed, composition.

The great black-and-white photographers who have printed their own work (some have left this part of the process to someone else, preferring to spend their time creating the images in the camera) have all, to my knowledge, struggled to arrive at a print that served their idea adequately. Most of us must admire greatness from a distance, and yet we also struggle in the darkroom, toward the same end. The original edges of the frame may need alteration through cropping; the ratio of dimensions likewise. The key must be chosen and the overall tone must be finely tuned, as well as the contrast. Within those overall determinations, local passages may need a different tone or contrast. These determinations may be modest or radical, for several reasons. First, the image is

but an optical recording from a single moment, on a limited medium of specific characteristics that may not cohere with the image in the mind of the artist. The great Ansel Adams, who eventually had to choose between following a career as a Classical pianist or as a photographer, famously made the analogy of the photographic negative as the score, the print the performance. It was not uncommon for him to spend several days on a single negative before achieving a satisfactory print.

Paul Strand, who, unlike Adams, reportedly knew little about the sensitometry and chemistry of his medium, similarly strove to achieve a single print that sufficiently expressed his purpose in a given image. His closest friend recalls once standing beside him as he reviewed a thick stack of prints, throwing into the trash basket one after the next that the friend (a notable photographer himself) thought excellent. "Not good enough," was Strand's rejoinder.

All printed some of their images multiple times over the years, with different results, much the way a pianist performs a given score differently over the years of a career. For the photographer, the paper available to print on also plays a role, just as for the pianist, the difference in instruments upon which he may be obliged, or choose, to perform.

An assistant to the famous photojournalist-artist W. Eugene Smith reported collaborating with Smith to make dozens of 5x7-inch prints, refining the printing from a single image, before the larger master print was attempted.

A photograph is not a painting, to be sure. The misperception, however, that the fact of its mechanical/optical origin confines it to the prison of abstract objective visual "fact" alone, misses the degrees of freedom available to the artist in whose hands the camera and darkroom are placed. Beyond the choices of camera format, perspective, optics, film, filtration, exposure, and timing to create the original image in camera, the film's development, and finally, the printing and finishing processes, offer further freedoms and choices to be made.

All very well, you say, but can great art result? For my part, I am content to speak of great photography. The great photographers I know generally went out of their way to study great painting and other art. As I have written in articles, photography's birth, coming as it did as late as the mid-19th Century, has placed it in the environment of an increasingly decadent Western culture, from which it has suffered. Nonetheless, many images of enduring artistry and value, in my view, have been created. Is it worthwhile pursuing its potentials? My answer, as you know, is a resounding affirmation.

That, for what it may be worth, is my limited, belated response to your passing statement, that you don't understand photography.

☺

*The philosopher replied:*

My dear friend,

Your insight into the poetic process is good. That is also the way I tend to look for thoughtful gems in paintings. For me, the process pertains to an epistemological

method that I have been using most of my life and which has always been my best looking glass; a glass which looks far and close at the same time.

You are right, it is the unity of an effect that a great master is looking for. And it is that unity of effect which is aimed at capturing the viewer and make him say "Aha!", and which sometimes induces him to change his way of looking at things. I thank you for enlightening me on all of the intricacies of the art technique of good photography and how some of them end up creating a beautiful composition in which I never know if it is the subject, the instrumentation, or the artist who did it. You might say it is all three, however, in classical painting, I would add that there is a fourth degree of freedom, which is the addition of ironies. This is the method of working with "illusions" that Fennimore Cooper talked about on page 20 of *The Last of the Mohicans*: "The colors of the war paint had blended in dark confusion about his fierce countenance, and rendered his swarthy lineaments still more savage and repulsive than if art had attempted an effect, which had been thus produced by chance."



The artist of classical artistic composition also has "photographic" problems to solve, but contrary to what the silly impressionists have introduced in France, the great classical artist aims at eliminating the brush stroke that will distract the spectator away from the conceptual unity he is seeking to convey. Instead, he seeks to include singularities or small details which will cause the investigative mind to ask: "What is this for? This shouldn't be here? How does that effect the unity of the subject?" That's what I look for in a painting; and that is what gives me great the greatest joy, when I find it.

For example, examine the Prado *Annunciation* by Fra Angelico [[Annunciation \(Fra Angelico, Madrid\)](#)], the study of which I have just finished for a friend's birthday gift, and ask yourself why are the right eye of God, the right eye of the magpie, and the right eye of Mary all three in the same line of sight?

Detail of *The Annunciation* by Fra Angelico, Prado museum, Madrid Spain.

For me, this paradoxical line of sight is part of Fra Angelico's unity of effect which was so well expressed by Dante in the introducing line of his last canto of Paradise:

"O Virgin Mother, daughter of thy Son!"

This is what made me write in the conclusion to the birthday piece: "It is the shocking reality of this paradoxical inversion which proves that God did not put the human mind before an endless struggle without giving it the means to become divine. He has given us, especially with the Annunciation of Mary, the ability to reach to the higher manifold which man is capable of constructing in his own mind, with his own forces, but never without the Grace of God."

☪

*Replied the first:*

Friend, I would argue that the employment of irony has by no means been absent from photography. However, its employment, when sought, tends to find different pathways from that of painting, due to the nature of the medium. You and I both recognize that it is more limited than painting (we adhere, properly, to defining the photograph as the single optical image created in the camera in a single exposure), but perhaps not as limited as you now think.

The photographer, in a single image, is restricted, first of all, by the laws of optics, in his or her potential for rendering a subject. Within this domain, he or she must strive to compose a potentially unified image, through command of perspective (location of the lens relative to subject), control of depth-of-field, and timing—which (leaving aside considerations of shutter speed here) may involve the effects of season, weather, and time of day, as well as momentary relationships created by activity within the lens's view. Unlike the painter, the photographer may make several or more images of the same subject, only one of which we will see. We assume this in photojournalism, at least since the sheet film camera was replaced by roll film varieties allowing up to either 12 or 36 images on a single roll. (Advanced digital cameras, of course, allow hundreds on a single memory card.) However, the sheet film photographer may also "work through" his subject. In a sense, this can be somewhat akin to the painter's sketches. In some cases, this will occur in a single session; in others, the photographer will return to the same subject on one or more additional occasions, to improve on an image attempted previously. An available contact sheet of one of the leading 20<sup>th</sup>-C. portraitists, Arnold Newman, from his session with Igor Stravinsky, is illustrative. Near the bottom of the page, see <https://pixls.us/blog/2016/10/arnold-newman-portraits/>. Here are thirteen 4x5-inch sheet-film negatives printed on a huge sheet of printing paper. His iconic portrait is the last, bottom right, with his rather extreme cropping from the full image drawn on it in grease pencil or marker. A full print is further up the page. It's a fair assumption that the images are arranged in order of their taking, as he works through ideas and closes in on a use of forms that suits his purpose.

While the differences of the photographic medium do not address irony *per se*, they suggest the way a photographer may probe in seeking it.

Now I offer several different examples for your consideration. One is the famous Steichen portrait of J. Pierpont Morgan (web search: Steichen+Morgan), portrayed sitting in an arm chair with a direct, piercing countenance. It appears that he holds in his left hand a long-bladed knife, ready for stabbing. In reality, it is simply the reflection



of light off the polished wood of the curving chair arm. Steichen always denied any intention to imply a weapon. We may observe, however, that the image was not made in a coal cellar at midnight, but is largely printed as if it had been. The figure is surrounded in deep darkness with scarcely any detail, and the photographer has carefully highlighted the left hand, the face, and enough of the clothing to give the body substance and connote Morgan's wealth. A gentle highlighting of the background near the head and shoulders outlines them and implies a physical setting. (The Morgan Library had a print of this image on display, when last I was there, but the "blade" was not at all prominent.) If we compare a mental image of how such a setting may actually have appeared, and how it is rendered, the artistic purpose becomes clear.

J. Pierpont Morgan by Edward Steichen.

A similarly famous image from the Farm Security Administration's documentary photographic project during the 1930s is more representative of the use of irony in photographs. The juxtaposition of people, objects, or both, present the viewer with a contrast of ironic implications. I will just note here, that one may, because is it "just a photograph," perceive this as merely fact, maybe chance, in which the photographer played no creative role. (The latter can happen, of course, but is not my concern here.) In light of my comments above, I think this is at least put into question. The image to which I am referring here is Dorothea Lange's photograph of a bread line of African Americans in Kentucky. (Web search: Dorothea Lange+American Way). Imagine all the ways the photographer might have approached the subject, and include in your consideration the accidents of timing on facial expressions and gestures in this image, probably chosen from several taken from the same view point (my guess). Notice, for example, the three-dimensional and two-dimensional (billboard image) interplay; also, the placement of the woman with the empty basket in the frame and relative to the



billboard, and the basket's tilt in the opposite direction from that of the writing on the sign.



African-Americans in a breadline by Dorothea Lange.

Such ironies are not on the level of such as *The Annunciation's* or countless others in painting, literature, poetry, music. No eyes of God, meticulously arranged perspective line conjunctions, multiple simultaneous lighting or spatial conditions to provoke the viewer's mind. In my view, they are, however, no less valid artistically, and point to the potential for ironic composition in photography. Photographers have to deal with circumstances beyond their control; some, sometimes, manage to supersede them.

Two other images, and a word or two in closing, will complete my discourse here.

Walter Rosenblum went to photograph Spanish Civil War refugees in a camp in southern France in 1946, making a number of very powerful images. Among them, *Brother and Sister* (<http://www.museoreinasofia.es/en/collection/artwork/brother-and-sister>). I don't think I need to say much about it. It takes time to see what is there.

In contrast, an image of Walter's from Paris, of children playing in a park (<http://exhibitions.nypl.org/recollection/tl67.html>). The irony here is of the lighter, delightful kind, but it never fails to elicit a laugh from me.

In some of my many memos to editorial staff and field photographers over a couple of decades in my work in our movement, I stressed the importance of concentration on the unseen, or, I should say, the non-physical. How does one convey the act of organizing or teaching? of causing a passerby who has stopped at our literature table, to think? How to convey the relationship of speaker to audience, as conveyed through his or her ideas? How to portray the process of economic decay, as we understand it, rather than merely taking snapshots of closed buildings? Or, the leadership of a candidate for political office?

There is no recipe, and most images will fall short. It is the one or two out of 72 or 108, or 360, that, with careful printing, may hold the attention of a newspaper or magazine reader for an extra second, and lodge in the memory with an implication that stretches far beyond the frame.

☞

*And the philosopher:*

I appreciate your educating me on this matter of mind, since it gives me a better handle on how to compare photography with classical artistic composition. I am beginning to see the science and the potential behind it; I can see as well the sketching function and the art mastering ironies, especially with the stunning example of Arnold Newman and Stravinsky's portrait.



Igor Stravinsky by Arnold Newman.



You are right, the example of Stravinsky's portrait at the piano is a beautiful case of a photographic irony. The flat symbol struck me immediately, even before reading the article explanation. I even found that it was the sharp angle (white background) of the wall which made me discover the flat (black piano lid) because the distance between the two had been flattened. That's when it came together for me: a coincidence of opposites in the form of a "sharp flat." I tend to see this Newman idea of "environmental portrait" as a variation on the more universal idea of the Fennimore Cooper principle that I mentioned previously. Consider the case of Worthington Whittredge's *The Old Hunting Grounds* (1864) [*The Old Hunting Grounds*] and Thomas Cole's *The Clove, Catskills* (1827) by comparison [The Clove].



Worthington Whittredge's *The Old Hunting Grounds* (1864).



The dramatic use of theatrical light illuminating the background in Worthington's piece draws the spectator to the lit birch trees of the central scene only to have him draw back again into the dark and stagnant waters in the foreground, where the recollection takes place. This is another coincidence of opposites. The intention is to create a "recollection" of the all but forgotten hunting grounds of the Mohicans who used to live in the Catskills region of the North East. The broken-down canoe gives the clue as to how the memory of a gone-by era functions by recalling the times gone by through the birch trees (present) being reflected through the canoe holes (past) which are acting as memory patches of where the bark used to be. The unity of effect is like the memory of the old soldier who still remembers the presence of the leg he has lost many years ago during the war. Cooper considered this form of intervening into nature as the art of creating an effect such that nature seemed to have helped the artist produce it by chance.



Thomas Cole's *The Clove, Catskills* (1827).

Thomas Cole also "recollected" the ghost of the "Last of the Mohicans" in his *The Clove, Catskills* in a similar manner. Do you see the barely visible Indian Chief standing on the ledge in the lower-center part of the painting? He is holding a stick with his left hand and is pointing toward the mountain with his right one.

I see the case of the Steichen-Morgan pun on “If looks could kill” in the same way. That use of ironies is typical of the Fennimore Cooper arsenal, because the joy of discovery must never reject the way nature might help you realizing a creative moment



in spite of your “intention.” From that vantage point, the portrait of Morgan would definitely have no interest whatsoever if it did not include the presence of a weapon matching his greedy intention of making a killing on the Stock Market. Don’t believe a word the genial photographer might have said to the contrary.

I think you made the case of artistic composition limitations of photography when you said: “In my view, they are, however, no less valid artistically, and point to the potential for ironic composition in photography. Photographers have to deal with circumstances beyond their control; some, sometimes, manage to supersede them.” I agree with you that artistic photography is dependent more on objective opportunity than on subjective and creative insights. However, like God, the painter, the poet, or the musical composer has all of the subjective freedom in the world to make the impossible a reality and his power is only limited by the Grace of the Creator.

The Clove, Catskills, the invisible Indian Chief.

☪

*Again, the photographer:*

Well, perhaps we differ a bit respecting your penultimate statement, as stated, that “artistic photography is dependent more on objective opportunity than on subjective and creative insights.” Is this just defensiveness on my part? I think not. I did say that objective circumstances are needed, because a photograph, as we have defined it, relies on physical reality before the lens. A favorite aphorism of Ansel Adams was that chance favors the prepared mind. This bit of understated wit comes to mind here, as I think of how a good photographer, like any good visual artist, not only sees visual relationships to which most people remain oblivious, but sees them, not as static but as dynamic ones, and it is this dynamic that helps to form the composition in his inner eye. Some of Adams’s magnificent landscapes portray subjects that, let’s say, are hard to miss—a sheer, 3,000-foot granite cliff does tend to grab one’s attention. As I indicated previously, however, it is often in the “small”, common circumstance, that the great photographer sees a potential for portraying an irony that others miss. It may take all his or her skills to realize it in a composition. Perhaps it involves people moving quickly

in relationship to each other, perhaps an unusual, even physically uncomfortable position in order to put the lens where it can bring harmony to a chaotic situation. Or, as you like it, take the Stravinsky portrait, made in that utterly dull, featureless room. How many, faced with the same assignment, would have discovered something transcending the objective circumstances as well as Newman? I would submit, that subjective and creative insights must be the starting point.

Again, I'll quote those who produced extraordinary results from their determined explorations of the medium. Adams, known for his technical perfection and sharply focused images, made the point that there is no value to a perfectly sharp photograph of a fuzzy concept. Strand counseled, that all the technique and skill in the world are of no use if the artist, first, has nothing to say.

☪

*And the philosopher:*

You are right, all the technique and skill in the world are for nothing if someone has nothing to say. After all, it was your recollection of what we had discussed before on the subject of photography that got me to discover things that I didn't know before. Or did I?

Which reminds me that all we know is what we can recall from previous lives throughout history, but not without having to go through the perplexing Meno Paradox. That's the effect that the Stravinsky portrait had on me, the "sharp flat." It was a wonderful trap, very similar to the one that Socrates used when he said to Meno, just before going into the problem of doubling the area of the square, that he had brought up a "trick argument" about how man can neither discover what he knows or what he doesn't know, because all knowledge is simply recollection of what is already dormant in one's immortal soul.

I truly believe that this is what the joy of discovering the unknown is all about, because ultimately, all we discover is our own ignorance and it is that ignorance which pushes us to go to the next step in discovery. It is as if all we have to do is to dig into the universal soul of creation and we will discover, there, all the epistemological riches that has been known before, but which had been deformed and forgotten throughout the centuries. Thank God we can remember at least that much.

— ☪ —