



ROUTLEDGE

Street Photography

From Atget to Cartier-Bresson

Clive Scott

street photography



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CLIVE SCOTT

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Hippolyte-Auguste Collard, *Hôtel de Ville, after the Fire* (1871)



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introduction

In a recent book on Parisian street photography, *Paris Pictured* (2002), Julian Stallabrass throws down an implicit challenge:

Paris, that great but compact cosmopolitan and imperial city, has a strong claim to be considered the cradle of street photography. The city helped form this genre of photography and, equally, photography contributed to the formation of the city, as Parisians saw first their buildings and then themselves reflected in the many photographic portraits constructed in magazines and books. (n.pag.)

The sense that Paris is the source of street photography, that Baudelaire and his ‘painter of modern life’, the ink-and-wash chronicler of wars and urban behaviour, Constantin Guys (1802–1892), are, or prefigure, the first street photographers, that Impressionist painters owed many of their subjects and compositional innovations to photography, and vice versa (see Westerbeck and Meyerowitz, 1994: 41–2, 44, 72), has floated freely around recent publications devoted to street photography. This book sets out to discover the ways in which these claims should be substantiated; but, more especially, it seeks to uncover the ‘selfhood’ of street photography, by exploring its relationship with documentary photography and with the aesthetics of photography more generally.

But I am interested, too, in street photography's emergence from, and contribution to, street painting, and I also want to suggest some of the ways in which urban writing of the period reflects both the street-photographic and the dialogue between the street-photographic and the documentary, and allows us better to understand these modes of perception.

My principal subject is, therefore, the street photography that has to do with Paris, although from time to time I cast an eye across to London, particularly a London seen through 'Parisianised' eyes. But mine is a West European affair; what is missing from my investigation is that so-called 'hard-boiled' strain of street photography – cynical, gritty, raw – of post-war American photographers such as Robert Frank, William Klein, Garry Winogrand (see Brougher and Ferguson, 2001). But one might just as pointedly ask why I have omitted reference to the street photography of Australia, or of Portugal, or of Greece, or of India. To feel bound to mention omissions in terms only of a certain photographic canon is tacitly to acknowledge our appalling visual illiteracy.

What kind of street photography, then, do we have to do with? A fairly clear idea can be garnered from *La Dame de Berlin* (*The Lady from Berlin*) (1987), the first novel in Dan Franck and Jean Vautrin's series, 'Les Aventures de Boro' (*The Adventures of Boro*). Each morning, in the early weeks of 1932, Blèmia Borowicz, the novel's photo-journalist hero, is to be found slinging his Leica across his chest and setting out to harvest another selection of Parisian faces. His favoured subjects are the small traders who give such expressive performances of the everyday, whose humour is laced with feistiness, who use cheek to cheat the crassest misery. In these streets, the bistrot is a kingdom for grey cloth caps, and the accordion officiates at marriages and banquets. Boro is just as likely to find himself sharing a glass of red wine with a fairground wrestler as passing the time of day with a Sunday gardener:

Ah, the people of Paris! They were certainly a motley crew to photograph! Boro, his eye glued to the viewfinder, stuffed himself with it all,

just as he pleased. ... Girls not niggardly with their charms, or crooks nasty-tempered with their fists. Spivs, errand girls, working women, *apaches*. But everywhere, life in the quick. Tender, fleshy. Characters with distinctive facial features, or get-ups, or habits, people he got to know – how could he fail to? – and who readily connived in his play-acting. He kept them company. Or rather, he grafted himself on to their lives. Donio,¹ the dog-trainer, Backless, the manager of the Villejuif ratodrome, or Weeny Bike, king of the Joinville pedal-boats – as many outings as happy days, as hours of learning. Boro had the knack of insinuating himself into people's intimacy or profiting from the decisive moment. His quick-acting intuition made him press the shutter release just at the right moment and gradually a certainty slipped into him, as warm as camaraderie, a voice whispering that his mission in life was to take on his contemporaries and that, instantaneous thief of their attitudes, of the faces they pulled, of the bared teeth of their joys and the cowardices of their solitudes, he was for ever destined to steal their truths. (1987: 114; unless otherwise attributed, translations are my own, and references are to the French source texts)

What does this passage tell us, in its writing, about street photography? We might select from this passage certain expressive tendencies which have implications for our further treatment of street photography. The language of street photography is not an amplified language – as that of documentary photography so easily can be (see Chapter 2) – and the opening exclamation marks reveal not an emotional intensity, but an ironic amusement, a simulated disbelief, an affectionate disownment. These are the equivocating, teasing kinds of motivation and response which both sustain and threaten to sentimentalise street photography: close by each street photograph a best-selling tourist postcard is waiting to bear that good-natured and flirtatious relationship with the street into the world of epistolary exchange.

Among other features to be picked out for future development are: the staccato, jotted style, which identifies street photography with perambulation and its peculiar world view (Chapter 1), with the speed of gesture, the glance, the haptic vision of Impressionism (Chapter 1), but also, occasionally, with the force lines of Expressionist and Futurist urban experience (Chapter 5); the use of nicknames and what they tell us about the 'redemption' of street types by eccentricity,

and the cultivation of the urban picturesque (Chapter 3); an easy collusion with duplicity, with peccadilloes, with the criminal fringes, those ambiguous relationships with the subject that the documentary photographer usually eschews (Chapter 5), and which make nocturnal activity an inevitable dimension of street photography (Chapter 5); the plurals – ‘Girls not niggardly’, ‘Spivs, errand girls’, ‘Characters with distinctive facial features’ – seem to present us, on the one hand, with a picture of the undifferentiated, of blurred lines between profession and character type and behavioural tic, and, on the other, with the heady promise of multiformity, of wonderfully random and changing lives, capable of flying off, anarchically, in all directions. Finally, we need to notice the way in which this passage first presents the photographer’s raw materials and then goes on to establish the qualities necessary to turn this raw material into successful photography. In Boro’s behaviour we find psychic and aesthetic resources which might have come straight from the writings of Cartier-Bresson: surreptitiousness, intuition – the street photographer also belongs to the criminal fringes – a feeling for the ‘decisive moment’, a sense of the instantaneous as the corridor into a certain kind of truth, the expression of one’s whole organism in the photographic act, a creative temperament (audacity, generosity, enthusiasm, etc.), unstable, unprofessional, but responsive, versatile, where appropriateness of response depends directly upon that versatility (Chapter 1).

We have already begun to define street photography in contradistinction to documentary. How justified is this distinction? One looks in vain in the index of Olivier Lugon’s recent *Le Style documentaire: D’August Sander à Walker Evans 1920–1945* (*Documentary Style: From August Sander to Walker Evans 1920–1945*) (2001) for the names of Marcel Bovis, Doisneau, Kertész, or René-Jacques; Brassai has just three entries, Cartier-Bresson four. An exception is made for Atget. Lugon argues that in France, as in the USSR, ‘we shall not find a documentary current in the sense that we understand it: images borrowing their neutrality from traditional documents, identity portraits, architectural archiving, etc.’ (2001: 28). There is too much emphasis,

in French photography of the period, on elements of narrative, instantaneousness, peripheral angles of vision, for the documentary style properly to have taken root. And the Surrealists may have cultivated the document as a fragment of raw reality stripped of all cultural intentions, but only because it was thus available to free-associative mechanisms and to subjective interpretations geared to the deeper operations of the individual psyche (27).

This perception seems to run against that presented by Ian Walker in *City Gorged with Dreams: Surrealism and Documentary Photography in Interwar Paris* (2002).² Part of Walker's thesis is the proposition that Surrealist photography which exploits 'straightness' and 'realism', is more Surrealist, more disruptive of conventional norms, than its experimental, manipulative counterpart (solarisation, rayograph, superimposition of negatives, petrification, etc.). Walker's application of the term is as wary as it is inclusive; for him, 'documentary' is a generic term – with 'street photography' presumably as a sub-genre – whose very pluralism makes it complex and unsteady:

Documentary is now a complex and multivalent genre that seeks to comment on issues of social and cultural importance without losing sight of the position from which that commentary is made. (2002: 4)

But I would not wish to call street photography a photography of commentary on issues of social and cultural importance, any more than I would wish to adopt Westerbeck and Meyerowitz's rather airy definition of street photography as 'candid pictures of everyday life in the street' (1994: 34).

In similar fashion, Gilles Mora (1998) includes street photography under the 'documentary' heading (85), but also has a separate entry for it, which makes no reference to documentary and offers the following definition: 'Street photographers pursue the fleeting instant, photographing their models either openly or surreptitiously, as casual passersby or as systematic observers' (186). This rather ambivalent definition reflects Mora's wish to see the street photographer as both *badaud* (the 'gawper' who happens to be in the right place at the right

time, without premeditation or motive) and *flâneur* (the serious amateur of other people's lives, in pursuit of quarry without quite knowing what it might be), as both casual reportage and as the potential vehicle of a new aesthetic (Rodchenko: Constructivism; Cartier-Bresson: the decisive moment). His entry on 'The City and Photography' (63-4) identifies a documentary of the street (architectural inventory, records of architectural change, preservational record of disappearing quarters, New Topographics), but also mentions those strains of street photography which treat the street as theatre, as witness to the intricate dynamics of life, as the trigger of many kinds of poetry.³

My approach treats street photography and documentary photography (a documentary photography of the street) as two genres on an equal footing, pulling in radically different directions. Of course, this approach entails processes of simplified binary thinking, a kind of ethnic cleansing of the terms which seems to deny their generical impurities or pluralistic capacity. But such a move is necessary if one is not to miss what seem to me to be their profoundly different overall orientations and ideologies. At the same time, it is necessary to remind ourselves that the reality is never as 'pure' as the theorised state, and to examine how the two modes, apparently inimical to each other, often manage to coexist in the same image.

One of the underlying assumptions of this book is therefore, inescapably, that generical definitions and parameters matter in photography, even though the whole thrust of the medium has been to underline the generical mobility of photographs, their ability to cross generic lines and adapt to new contexts. If anything, we might propose that the importance of genericism is a construct of the viewer rather than of photography itself, and that this may be a defence mechanism, a way of diminishing our vulnerability to photography's promiscuity. A vivid example of this phenomenon, an example close to our present concerns, was provided by a set of photographs taken by Michael Heffernan in 1995, and exhibited at the Coningsby Gallery in the autumn of 1996, under the title 'Streets: London's Young Homeless'. The photographs provoked some sharp indignation. Fellow-photographer of the mar-

ginalised Nick Danziger identifies them as fashion shots and taxes them with their lack of contextualisation: ‘These pictures strike you because the young homeless people have been packaged, taken out of their environment (the street is removed so they appear as in a studio setting)’ (1996: 8). In the same magazine (*The Big Issue*), Linda Grant pursues the same indictment of generical crossover (street fashion, grunge, real deprivation):

The effect of this appropriation means that Heffernan’s photographs look less like startling depictions of homeless people as we have never seen them, than rather vapid copies of what we have viewed already in other contexts. Attempting to take pictures without a realism which has itself become a style, one can only fall back on another style which does not show homeless people as they really are but how they might look if they were in a different, equally stylish context. (1996: 9)

These remarks are instructive. One of the arguments that we will be pursuing in Chapter 2 is that while documentary photography tends to imply – perhaps *needs* to imply, for its own dramatic effectiveness – that social predicaments are permanent, are evidence of powerlessness in the face of endemic social inequalities, street photography depicts predicaments as (hopefully) temporary, a glitch in a colourful and varied existence.⁴ The life of the deprived in a documentary photograph is at best immobilised, and at worst, and more probably, in a downward spiral; deprivation in a street photograph occurs within a photographic mentality which is short-termist and addicted to a view of typicality as itself constituted by change. In this way, while both the documentary photograph and the street photograph can concern themselves with, say, tramps, the documentary is more likely to find the down-and-out, while the street photograph will give us the *clochard*, down on his luck, but weathering the storm.

At all events, in these criticisms of Heffernan’s photographs, we might propose that Heffernan perceives the contemporary young homeless, for a variety of social and economic reasons, as a street-photographic subject rather than a documentary one. His critics feel that, in so doing, he is both betraying the *real* condition of the homeless

and, by the same token, absolving the viewer of moral responsibility. In short, either Heffernan has indeed opted for the wrong genre (an ethico-aesthetic mistake), or his critics want to force his work into what is essentially a nineteenth-century view of poverty, unmistakable in its evidential force, but dangerous perhaps in that the persuasive power of the evidence depends directly on the subject's being depicted as permanently condemned to his/her condition; transient misfortune is hardly likely to provoke public outcry. But more insidious still, and an important element in the argument of Linda Grant, is photography's own predicament: because the photograph is so weak in intentionality (Berger and Mohr, 1982: 90), in its ability to say what it means, so it must either outbid itself, make its case with the crassest obviousness, or it must fall back on language to make its case for it. More particularly, the photograph shaves context down to something wafer-thin. The photograph can never tell us enough of the story (see n4).

But if photography's implication in generical distinction has much to do with the perceptual anxieties of the viewer, with the strong pressures of visual expectation, photography has also itself to blame. As Walter Benjamin saw only too clearly, photography got off on the wrong foot by measuring itself, for much too long, against the principles and criteria of painting: 'Nevertheless, it was this fetishistic and fundamentally anti-technological concept of art with which the theoreticians of photography sought to grapple for almost a hundred years, naturally without the smallest success. For they undertook nothing less than to legitimise the photographer before the very tribunal he was in the process of overturning' (1999: 508). But even when 'New Vision' photography (Strand, Renger-Patzsch, Moholy-Nagy, Rodchenko, etc.) began to generate a peculiarly photographic seeing, genericism simply relocated itself. Thus, for all its ability to provide us with images of everything, to buck the generical constraints that continued to govern painting, the photography of the city seems simply to have become obsessively preoccupied with a new range of visual topics: people leaping puddles, empty chairs, road sweepers, markets, shop windows, café mirrors. One might argue that the very



FIGURE I André Kertész, *Pavement* (1929)



FIGURE 2 Robert Doisneau, *Pavement* (1932)

reproducibility of the photograph made the proliferation of imitation, quotation and allusion inevitable; one might argue that we only see what other images have taught us to see. Looking at André Kertész's *Pavement* of 1929 (Figure 1), one cannot but think it the trigger of Robert Doisneau's 1932 pavement photograph (Figure 2) and Wols's of 1932-39 (Figure 3). In all of these images, the three protagonists – the paving stones of the roadway, the water in the gutter, the granite kerbstones – play out their dramas of colliding materials, timescales and textures. The paving stones of the roadway belong to the past, bear