

# READING AS A METHOD OF PHOTOGRAPHIC CRITICISM

*Criticism is a form of studied discourse about works of art. It is a use of language primarily designed to facilitate and enrich the understanding of art.*

Morris Weitz<sup>1</sup>

*Intelligent critical literature on photographs is barely discernible. No other art of comparable importance in our time possesses a body of literature more imbalanced or humdrum.*

Henry Holmes Smith<sup>2</sup>

*Until recently, creative activities for children were thought of as limited to the making of art. More and more teachers now realize that talking and writing knowingly and perceptively about works of art are equally creative tasks they can set for children.*

*Guidelines for Planning Art Instruction in the Elementary Schools of Ohio*

Concurrently, but independently, a handful of photographic educators, and a growing number of art educators have been voicing concern that attention be given to critical response to art objects in conjunction with their production. The photographers are appalled with the dearth of qualitative photographic criticism, while art educators have been asking for an inclusion of the established discipline of art criticism into the cur-

riculum along with the production of art and the study of the history of art. This article is an attempt to further interest about photographic criticism in both educational communities.

by Terry Barrett

In reviewing the body of photographic criticism, John L. Ward, in *The Criticism of Photography as Art*,<sup>3</sup> has identified five major approaches; Pictorialism, Purism, Intentionalism, Archetypal Criticism and Reading. Briefly, Pictorialism is an aesthetic which states that a photograph is a form of art and ought to be judged by the same standards as other two dimensional art. In its historic context, however, the pictorialist evaluative criteria were rigid laws adapted from pictures which were painted between 1500-1850.

Purism is a later aesthetic, championed by such photographers as Edward Weston and Paul Strand, developed in opposition to Pictorialism for the purpose of liberating photography from an outdated painting aesthetic. The purists maintained that a photograph ought to extol the unique recording abilities of the medium. In Ward's words, "to the pictorialist, photography is a means, art is the end; to the purist, photography is both means and end, and talk about art is highly suspect."<sup>4</sup> A second divisive issue concerns the object being photographed: for the purist the object is not merely the occasion but the reason for the photograph, while the pictorialist is more intent on expressing himself through the object.

Intentionalism is found in criticism of many art forms. A main spokesman for the intentionalist approach to photography is A. Kraszyna-Krausz, who emphatically states the position in the *Focal Encyclopedia of Photography*:

*The purpose of the photographer in making a particular picture must receive first consideration; whether his work appears to fulfill that purpose or falls short is, in fact, the only point that really matters.<sup>5</sup>*

Archetypal Criticism is interpretive analysis which uses Jungian psychology to search for symbols which lie at the roots of all human experience. However, there is only one example<sup>7</sup> of this approach in photographic literature, and at this point it cannot be considered a major approach.

Reading as a method of photographic criticism appeared in the 1950's, and is derivative of an earlier literary model developed by I. A. Richards and the New Critics who followed. Reading as adapted by Henry Holmes Smith, Minor White, and Walter Chappel is a procedure by which one attempts to uncover and communicate the various meanings a photograph may yield through visual analysis of the photograph itself, coupled with an avoidance of evaluation.

Of the five approaches, each with its set of intriguing problems, Reading is chosen for consideration here because it was proposed by teaching photographers expressly for use in the photography curriculum. Minor White and Henry Holmes Smith promoted criticism as an integral part of photographic study for two main reasons: to help people attend to meaning in photographs rather than limit themselves to technique and equipment, and to build a base for more substantive professional criticism. Over twenty-five years later the same needs are being expressed.

Photographic criticism as Reading was short-lived.

It was strongly pushed in the pages of *Aperture* in the 1950's and then disappeared from the literature. This article analyzes the Reading approach to photographic criticism with the theoretical work of aesthetician Morris Weitz in an attempt to see what Reading is, identify its short comings, and to suggest improvements to make it a valuable part of photographic education today.

Morris Weitz, in *Hamlet and the Philosophy of Literary Criticism*,<sup>8</sup> analyzed all the criticism written about *Hamlet*, treating it as a paradigm of criticism in general to uncover its aims, doctrines, procedures, issues and assumptions. He found that there is a logical multiplicity in criticisms and that the assumption that criticism yields true or false definitive statements is itself false. He established that critics mostly describe, explain, evaluate and theorize. Critics do not necessarily do all four of these procedures, but all criticism reduces to at least one of these.

Description is a procedure by which the critic decipher the facts or data, or what is given, in a work. These givens, and therefore undeniables, are not trivial since they serve as reminders or reports on some of the elements, characteristics, and relations in a work, and constitute a body of verifiable statements which serve to enlighten and make understandable the work in question, and are the basis of interpretations.

Critical interpretations, readings, understandings, or statements of meaning all function logically as explanation. In explaining, critics begin with their true (or false) descriptions of some of the data in the work, and hypothesize about what is central in the work. When critics introduce hypotheses they can be challenged in many ways, and as long as debate and doubt are possible concerning what the work means, there cannot be any true, best, or correct explanation, only explanations which are more or less adequate.

Evaluation is a critical procedure which attempts to judge the worth of the work in question. Evaluation is neither a necessary nor sufficient procedure of criticism: the history of criticism includes much criticism which has nothing whatever to do with evaluation. Evaluation is shown to be argument, primarily about criteria of merit and reasons for their application.

When critics theorize, or engage in poetics, they attempt to formulate true definitions of aesthetic essences. Weitz argues that unlike the procedures of description, explanation, and evaluation, poetics is an illegitimate procedure of criticism in that it attempts to define the undefinable. Although logically illegitimate, the attempts to define tragedy, art, or the nature of photography serve to clarify important issues and recommend criteria which enrich our understanding. Weitz concludes that while criticism includes many things, its main purpose is the general goal of facilitating or enriching the understanding of art.

In the 1950's Minor White and Henry Holmes Smith,

in their college teaching and through *Aperture* magazine, introduced Reading as a method of responding to photographs to facilitate and enrich understanding. Their concern grew out of a realization that important imagery was being slighted due to photography's general preoccupation with technical considerations to the exclusion of all else; ignorance of past and contemporary masters' work; and the dominance of mass media photographs which editors insisted must be made to yield immediate comprehension in deference to the viewer-on-the-run.

The thrust of Reading is to communicate to a group of students what one has privately experienced in a photograph after having concentrated on the picture. The purpose of experiencing the picture is to see how complicated a thing a photograph is, and to "explore, sound out, measure however inefficiently, not good or bad, but what a picture says."<sup>9</sup>

White devoted considerable energy in encouraging multi-level responses to the varied, less than obvious, "sacred" meanings serious photographs can offer as part of his desire to repair the historical breach between the sacred, esoteric sources of art, and the secular, pragmatic sources of photography.

Both Smith and White were strongly influenced by I. A. Richards' writing on the criticism of poetry. Smith specifically adapted the difficulties in interpreting poetry specified by Richards to problems encountered in viewing photographs. Generally they had to do with blockage of new experience by old perceptual patterns.

Smith identified three basic assumptions in his development of Reading:

- (1) *mature photographers are capable of providing complete images, which may be examined and "understood" without correction or elision;* (2) *sometimes these photographers may be articulate about what they have done;* (3) *intelligent attention to and discussion of a photograph may help some individuals appreciate more clearly some difficult pictures.*<sup>10</sup>

Smith's basic method of Reading involves a group of students who look at a photograph, write down important responses, discuss the responses in an attempt to arrive at a consensus of interpretation, and check their interpretation's accuracy by comparing it to the photographer's previously written statement. The photograph must be considered as it is, not as it could have been. Evaluation is to be suspended as long as possible, if it is considered at all. The thrust of the exercise is towards interpretation.<sup>11</sup>

In his approach to Reading, Minor White asked that the photograph under consideration be placed in one of four categories: documentary, pictorial, informational,

or equivalent. A documentary photograph is one that stresses content above all else. A pictorial photograph is more concerned with expression and visual effect than subject matter. An informational photograph is scientific, such as an aerial photograph. Equivalent is used as an honorific, rather than a descriptive, term which subsumes exceptional photographs from any category.

White suggested a questioning approach for observation of the photograph being Read. The Reader was directed to seek out all possible information; how manner underlies statement, formal photographic qualities, expressive content, and so forth. As an example, if a photograph is of an individual, one is to ask oneself about the person's environment, occupation, marital status, mental, physical, and emotional state, or anything else he can decipher from the picture.

A variation is offered by White which is designed to sustain attention to the photograph and to help achieve a fuller experience through tranquil meditative concentration:

- A photograph is put on view, but not looked at—*  
*While a period of quiet relaxation is set up within the individual—*  
*Only then are eyes opened to engage the photograph—*  
*With the body and muscles absolutely still, concentration—*  
*To the exclusion of all else except—*  
*A growing rapport with image*  
*Mental activity is heightened by—*  
*Scanning, memorizing everything visible—*  
*Until all is seen and felt*  
*Now a natural period of mental quiet can take over—*  
*During which one listens—and listens—*  
*The photograph as a whole may be heard visually if one is receptive the photograph may speak visually*  
*Tho, if you insist, it may speak in your own words.*<sup>12</sup>

While the Reading literature was relatively profuse in the late 1950's, none has appeared in recent years. White himself, in a candid postscript to a report on a Reading experiment, stated that "it was becoming painfully obvious that Reading photographs is an uncertain field. Perhaps only the most rudimentary knowledge exists in it."<sup>13</sup> White did not specify the reasons for his dissatisfaction with the method, but in reviewing published Readings, although struck by some significant insights about photographs, one is disappointed with some very arbitrary and subjective interpretations and associations which have little apparent relevance to the visual information available in the photograph.

While Minor White and Henry Holmes Smith both used the term Reading for their approaches to talk about photographs, and shared similar reasons for engaging in such talk, and while both were simultaneously working with the method and publishing their processes and conclusions, it becomes apparent that Reading is not the same for both.

Reading for Henry Holmes Smith was primarily a means of interpreting photographs, and Reading for Minor White was toward appreciating the richness of a photographic image. Aesthetic educator Ralph A. Smith has made a distinction between "argumentative aesthetic criticism" the purpose of which is to communicate and defend experience, and "exploratory aesthetic criticism," the purpose of which is to maintain a sustained aesthetic experience.<sup>14</sup> This distinction is useful in sorting out the differences between the two approaches to Reading.

Since Henry Holmes Smith's use of Reading is toward interpretation, Morris Weitz's conclusions about the critical procedure of interpretation are helpful in improving the thrust of interpretive Reading and will serve to answer some of Smith's problems with the Reading approach. If interpretations or explanations are understood to be hypothetical statements of meanings, then the Reader ought to support his interpretation with evidence gathered primarily from the information in the photograph. The Reader should also understand that no interpretation will be absolute or final, but will be open to alternative interpretations or modifications by other Readers. The better interpretation will be the one that builds a coherent account of all the important data observable in the photograph. The interpretive claim might also be supported by historical, sociological, psychological, metaphysical, or aesthetic evidence external, but relevant to, the photograph being Read.

Reasonableness, relevance, and comprehensiveness of the "argument" then become the criteria of sound interpretation and the photographer's previously written statement of intent may be dropped as criteria. Dropping intentionalism immediately solves some problems not identified by Smith: most photographs do not have accompanying written statements of intent; many photographers choose not to be articulate about their work; and in Minor White's words, "photographers often photograph better than they know."<sup>15</sup>

Smith's expressed problem of believing the photograph was important enough to study may be answered with a belief that any photograph is worth studying if the Readers engage in a process that clarifies their critical thinking and increases their understanding of photography. Smith's second problem of finding appropriate approaches to discussing the picture may be answered similarly. Several approaches are available: the photograph may be approached from a historical, sociologi-

cal, psychological, metaphysical, aesthetic, or some other point of view. In most cases any approach will yield insights into the picture being Read, and the most appropriate approach will be the one yielding the greatest amount of understanding.

If we agree with Weitz that it is logically impossible to identify absolute evaluative criteria for photography, Smith's fourth problem of developing criteria for judgment remains unsolved but clarified. What can be asked of the Reader who wishes to judge a photograph is that he clearly state his criteria, and apply it to the photograph being Read, knowing that the criteria is not absolute, but that argument over criteria does enrich our understanding of photography.

Both Smith and White agree on deemphasizing, if not altogether eliminating, evaluation in Reading. The procedure of description, and interpretation may well be enough to satisfy Reading's attempt to sustain attention to a photograph and to facilitate intelligent talk about photography.

If Reading, as proposed by White, is primarily intended to explore and sound out how complicated a thing a photograph is, rather than offer a specific interpretation of it, then any means which sustain aesthetic attention to the photograph are beneficial. Readers, as suggested by White, may profitably engage in free-associations with the image, impromptu role playing, meditation techniques, and particularly his proposed questioning strategy. And the critical procedure of description takes on increased importance if Reading is to be a form of exploratory aesthetic criticism.

In any given photograph there is a grouping of visual elements selected by the photographer. The Reader's task becomes one of identifying these elements, their characteristics, and the relationship among them. The job of the Reader is to point out all that is in a given photograph rather than to interpretively argue which element is least or most important. The Reader may attend to the subject matter of the photograph, describing who or what is in the picture, who or what is immediately outside the picture, what the relationships are between person and environment, or object to object, figure to ground, unseen past to depicted present, and so forth. Information external to the photograph may also be profitably attended to such as information about the artist, the relationship of the one picture to the photographer's body of work, relevant photographic and general art history, facts about nature or society that relate to the picture, and so on.

The standard artistic formal qualities of line, shape, texture and balance as well as formal qualities more specific to photography such as the transformation of space with lenses, the photographer's decisions about inclusion and exclusion through the viewfinder, angle of view, film format, tonal range, etc., may also be

profitably described. Speculations concerning the original subject matter in relationship to the finished two dimensional photographic print may serve to facilitate discussion about reality in relation to photographic representation and transformation, and raise issue about the photograph's inherent credibility. These concerns for the photograph's formal qualities may generally lead the Reader to discoveries of how the photograph is expressive.

Finally, regardless of whether Reading is used as a method of interpretation or explanation, both Smith and White have expressed concern with enlightening the participants through Reading. It is suggested here that Readers report the process as well as the conclusion of their Readings, and join in group description or interpretation rather than merely presenting conclusions of their private and silent experiences. Reading as a method of experiencing photographic meaning and richness would seem to have much to benefit students of photography, and deserves more attention, trial, and refinement.

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#### NOTES

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