

PLAYING OUT THE PHOTOGRAPHY OF CONCERN: STARBUCKS IN L.A. , “TEATRO AMAZONAS” IN BRAZIL AND WENER BISCHOF IN PERU

The photograph reveals only a single grotesque or comic moment, I thought, not the person as he really was more or less all his life. The photograph is a perverse and treacherous falsification. Every photograph – whoever took it, whoever is pictured in it – is a gross violation of human dignity, a monstrous falsification of nature, a base insult to humanity.

Thomas Bernhard

There are only two forces that can carry light to all corners of the globe, the sun in the heavens and the Associated Press down here.

Mark Twain

Walking into the transit lounge at the airport in Lima I already feel miles away from my family behind the glass wall waving goodbye crowded together with others stretching to look one last time. The transit lounge is steaming and smells like a musty indoor jungle. Billboard sized transparencies lit from behind of “Peruvian-ness” line the transit area: A child playing pan-pipes; a woman weaving a colorful rug; the stonework from Machu Pichu; a man walking a llama... Werner Bischof took the best photographs I’ve ever seen of native Peruvians when he visited Lima and Cuzco in 1954. He seems to have had some affinity for the people, and yet he writes to his wife in April of that year: "I am a stranger in this city, I sensed it yesterday as I walked through the streets towards Mount San Cristobal, from where one has that fantastic view right to the sea. I passed these miserable mud huts, which are almost indistinguishable from the slums of Hong Kong - as in Mexico, depressing poverty at every turn. Must I take that again and again! I cannot - but what else is there - the rich in Miraflores on the other side of the city are just as depressing. The Far East was so beautiful by comparison! I often think of it. I also think a lot about my great plans, the equipment - whether there really is any point to all this effort and expense for the very few shots that might be interesting."

Bischof would be dead three weeks after that letter and his impression of that city, where I was born and raised, and in particular, his doubts about those "very few shots" are, I

think, moving. I sit in a plastic chair in a transit lounge facing away from the television and let my mind wander over the last three weeks visiting my family and being a tourist in my home town.

Back in Los Angeles I can no longer go to my favorite café in Lima so I go to Starbucks. There I see some pictures: six 16”X20” color photographs mounted with white borders and aluminum frames. The frames are so ubiquitous and the images are so generalized that they are almost invisible. The pictures illustrate various stages in the cultivation of coffee. One image grabs me: A dark skinned man stands in a sea of coffee beans grimacing at the camera. I am reminded of Sharon Lockhart's photographic series “Teatro Amazonas” – color photographs of a dark skinned woman carefully holding various kinds of fruit in her left hand. She looks at the camera, at times with a slight smile, acknowledging the camera, the pose. She is self-conscious, complicit like the man in the Starbucks picture. The two images mirror each other, but as in any mirror everything is reversed. What is "everything"? Why is one picture in a coffee shop and another in an Art Gallery? Why would a coffee shop need to show pictures of people harvesting coffee? I haven't seen anything of the sort in any cafe in Latin America (where the stuff is actually grown); in fact, they would be more likely to have a picture of a pretty girl on a motorcycle. This photography of the worker, the poor, the dying and the dead is often called the "photography of concern". This work has a tidy niche deftly promoted by the Magnum photography agency and featured in Aperture magazine among others. This is their bread and butter. We habitually see these pictures in newsmagazines or attached to letters asking for money or as illustrations to articles about a catastrophe. The images are immediately readable as belonging to a category of images, the language is codified. We know to cry and reach into our pocket. In Starbucks' decorative pictures or Lockhart's photographs we can't without falling into over-simplification refer to them as part of the photography of concern. They have both

carefully placed themselves outside of this context yet they unmistakably reference it. How can we think of these images (Starbucks/Lockhart) that co-opt the visual language of the photography of concern without having the label photojournalism attached to it? Where is the difference, where can we find it, and once found how do we talk about it? Let's trace the origins of this movement.

Werner Bischof is one of the great photographers of the 20th century, and one of the founders of the Magnum agency, hence one of the creators of the photography of concern. His career began, as so many other photographers then and now, as a painter, then quickly to the School of Applied Arts in Zurich, studying with Hans Finsler, one of the pioneers of *Neue Fotografie*. Influenced by surrealism, constructivism and cinema *Neue Fotografie* created talents as wide ranging as Moholy-Nagy and Herbert Matter. Its more minor efforts now look like impersonal exercises in a design class. Bischof's work appeared for the first time in *Du* magazine December 1941 when the magazine was ten months old. In Paris during the early forties he came under the influence of Man Ray. His editor at *Du*: "In many a discussion we requested or suggested more pictures of people. But he had to overcome a certain reserve" In 1946 he publishes his first book: *24 Photos*. The first 23 photographs of that book present the best of his early work for *Du* which he described so succinctly himself: "Tender maple leaves as if chased in silver, the silky coat of cats, shadow plays projected on to the back of a nude model, snail shells again and again." The last photograph was taken in a refugee camp in Ticino, Italy in 1945. It's a daring, intense, eye-level shot of a refugee child holding a huge metal bowl. *Du* refused to publish it. Bischof's reply: "My eyes are opening. I am learning to see". He would continue to take this kind of picture for the rest of his life until his death in Peru thirteen years later.

Starbucks brought to the general American population the pleasures of European and

South American cafes – more or less - and there's the rub. In Starbucks every square inch of space has been thought out, as a problem, and has been solved as a concept. The wallpaper, done in green, gold and brown, depicts various seals, words and fragments of official documents evoking not a particular history, but rather the more general "historical". The ceiling has exposed electrical conduits and air conditioning ducts painted in matte black. Everything is shown and out in the open. The lights hanging from the ceiling, also painted black, refer to fifties modernist design and to purely utilitarian warehouse fixtures without being either. The music that is piped in – most often jazz and world music – feels as if it had lost whatever reasons there once were to create it; it all becomes elevator music whatever its origins or its value in the culture that once produced it. The furniture references domestic, corporate and public transit furniture. It is perfectly balanced between stations. In short, every surface, shape, color, sound and piece of furniture at Starbucks is there not only to serve a function but also to express a concept. It is a style that has been around for many years in airports: the architecture of transition. Conceptually this transition is achieved without physical effort of any kind, it is something that one inhabits – and more to the point this homogenization of space and time is meant to be comforting and reassuring. If Starbucks is as thoroughly mediated a space as I believe the six photographs in the corner must in some way be illustrating the corporate party line. What is the agenda?

Bischof again: "Then the war came and with it the destruction of my "ivory tower". My attention focused henceforth on the face of human suffering. I saw this a thousand times over: stranded people waiting for days and weeks behind barbed wire; children and old people - behind them exploding grenades and speeding armored cars. I was driven to get to know the real face of the world." He was sent to document the effects of the war for Schweizer Spende, a Swiss relief organization. In that year he traveled to Vienna, Heidelberg, Frankfurt, Mainz, Essen, Dusseldorf, Cologne, Aachen, Hanover, Berlin,

Leipzig, Dresden, Monte Casino, Naples, Tuscany and Athens! How did this breakneck speed of traveling affect Bischof's mind? Are the effects something that we can see in his work? This is the speed of contemporary photojournalism - or perhaps of traveler's everywhere with a camera covering their face like a mask. Albert Einstein called photographers "light monkeys" – still the best description of photographers. A publishing company cancels the release of a book featuring Bischof's first color work; the book would have depicted, in the words of the publishing firm's press release: "People and their behavior in the present chaos". The pseudo-scientific detachment feels contemporary and eerie. The book is eventually cancelled - perhaps for the obvious reason: who would be there to buy it? He is offered a contract with Life magazine, but nothing comes of it.

The photographs in Starbucks's contain a narrative with a beginning a middle and an end. Here we get more to the heart of the problem and why the photography of concern would be asked to play a role in the story of the production of coffee illustrated in Starbucks. Let's look closer. The photographs are in a corner, three on each side. I see that the pictures on the left depict raw coffee beans, the ones in the middle, harvesting and processing, the ones on the right the familiar whole beans for sale at Starbucks. There are human beings in only two of the six pictures. The process, as shown, is surprisingly sterile. Now this is very funny. If anyone has ever been to an actual coffee growing area, such as Iquitos in Peru, the first things one sees are massive amounts of dust and human sweat intermingled with coffee beans and the loud dirty oily machines that process them. We see children pissing, prostitutes waiting, patrones screaming...very un-Starbucks. That the photographs would ignore this reality is normal considering the corporate nature of the enterprise, but why are the two humans included? Why the close ups of the hands of two young girls holding coffee beans and the man leaning on sacks of coffee? What role are they asked to play? Why does the man look into the camera and grimace?

Perhaps because he has no power and no money. Good reasons! Significantly the only workers shown are at rest in their pictures. To show them working, in the manner of Sebastian Salgado's brilliant photographs of workers, would create interesting, and for that reason undesirable, links between picking coffee and contemporary slavery. The laborer is depicted as a part of this landscape of coffee; he is a part of its very "nature". The coffee pickers, like Millet's *Gleaners*, have always been here and they will always be here. They get abstracted and romanticized. History is referenced and put on hold at the same time. The laborers are not so much invisible as transparent – a part of the overall design within the frame – the "human interest". At Starbucks the male is on the left and the females on the right. Production and fertility are equated – the bean as seed. Lockharts' pictures are too smart to fall into such simplistic categorical strategies. They also have no desire to be "background music"; they are to be seen in galleries. But the woman posing with the fruit - what is she? Do we just go from beans to fruit? Is it a new version of Carmen Miranda? Is it *Betrayed by Rita Hayworth* all over again? No, there is more at stake than that – and there is a similarity between the photographs after all.

Let's go back again even further – to the beginning of the photography of concern. Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine, in early 20th century New York City referred to their photography as "illustrations". Hine, working for the National Child Labor Committee, illustrated the need to reform child labor practices. Riis wrote that the first glass plates that he took, of a mass grave for paupers in New York "was so dark...as to be almost hopeless" but that "the very blackness of my picture added a gloom to the show more realistic than any art of professional skill might attain". The pictures had to be as "objective" and authentic as possible. The photographs had to function as a window into the world in order to convey social truths. If people thought that the pictures were false in any way, they would not be moved to action. Riis and Hine equated aesthetics with artificiality and fakery – therefore to get to the "truth" about a subject, aesthetics had to

be avoided. Ironically, the work of Riis and Hine itself became an aesthetic that signified "authenticity". This style quickly calcified into metaphor, becoming – at a glance – the "photography of the disenfranchised" or "the photography of concern".

Their cause is taken up by picture magazines that are hugely successful in the United States and Europe and dominate visual communication in the 1940's. Philip Halsman and David Douglas Duncan in the US work for *Life*, Felix H. Man and Umbo in Germany work for *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung*; Cartier-Bresson, Robert Capa and "Chim" sell their work through their own agency, *Magnum*; Rodchenko and El Lissitzky in the Soviet Union work for *Building the USSR*, Bill Brandt in England works for *Illustrated* and *Picture Post*. Nevertheless Moholy-Nagy expressed some concerns: "...there is great danger that demonstrating unmistakably the potential of photographic means will cause an unintended crisis in photographic work in the near future. There will be 'recipes' to produce 'beautiful pictures' without difficulty. What matters, however, is not that photography should become an art in the conventional sense (Steiglitz's hope) but the great social responsibility of the photographer, who uses the elementary photographic means at his disposal to produce a work that could not be created by any other means. This work must be the undistorted document of contemporary reality".

This prophetic warning did not mean, of course, that the photographer would be "objective" or would pretend to be without aesthetic means. On the contrary - that's where it gets more complicated. Moholy continues: "The aim must be to express the motif in its most succinct and convincing form. If this requires a distorted perspective, then it is because the end has justified the means. But the end is not in the material things themselves, nor in the work of art." If the end is not in the material things themselves (Realism), nor in the work of art (Pictorialism) where is it? Not surprisingly the answer is to be found in Moholy's own photographs in which all of the strategies at the artist's

disposal are in play, balanced and orchestrated, but always at the service of expressing his beliefs. This was the aesthetic logic of the photography of concern: there would be a kind of dance or improvisation between photographer and subject and the photographic image would be the result of this meeting. Mistakes would be constant, since every situation is, in the literal sense, a new one. The hopes were high but the results were more often than not disappointing. The reason was that the narrative logic of magazine layouts dictated by editors, elicited a strict and conservative “overall meaning” resembling propaganda. Like many Hollywood films, which they resemble in terms of the primacy of concept, their primary purpose was to entertain and reassure. This photography reaches a kind of zenith in the *Family of Man* exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art in 1955 under the leadership of Edward Steichen. Composed of 503 photographs under various categories such as love, food, children, death the exhibit brilliantly anticipated McLuhan’s “Global Village” theme but also reinforced the predictable narrative logic that the picture magazines had been espousing for decades. For photography, at least as it was depicted in the picture magazines, history would be put on hold once again (during the height of the cold war!) and it would remain for independent photographers and filmmakers to take a look around with historical perspective and acumen. The same year as *The Family of Man* William Klein released his groundbreaking book *Life is Good and Good for You in New York* (published first in France as was Robert Frank’s *The Americans*) and Robert Aldrich made *Kiss Me Deadly* – a film that shows the precious categories of the exhibit in the context of a cynical, paranoid, xenophobic, self destructive reality full of class antagonisms and sexual loathing. It is not the kind of thing that would be shown in MoMA in 1955 unless one went to the older part of the museum where Picassos’ *Guernica* was also drawing large crowds.

In the photographs in Starbucks and Lockhart’s series in Brazil the individuals pictured have been turned into statues that signify. Their individual reality appears empty, Both

sets of pictures celebrate the human gaze but the gaze itself is not allowed to function – it is locked down. It is frozen - it is made to mean. These are not subtle images – they are politically loaded, and the context, which might bring the political to the surface and articulate it is always relegated to the level of aesthetics. Formal properties frame the gaze, and hold it in check. The photograph illustrates an idea and the specific individual who is pictured is there to satisfy the conventions that must be followed – she or he is but the means to an end. In a strange sense, Lockhart can't face this woman except as a medium for an idea. In the text of "Teatro Amazonas", the catalog for that body of work, we read about Lockhart's pictures: "For with the permission of an "objective" gaze, she does what she has so often done, which is to fuse it with a gaze of affection." Bischof saw this gaze too in a different light - describing the Indians of Cuzco as “selling themselves to tourists as postcard subjects”. They know the role and what they offer cannot be true. That gaze is sentimental, essentialist and illustrative of a narrative they did not write. It has no history, no present, it exists in abstract space making it an ideal vehicle for rhetoric – or for advertising. It states the fact of poverty, without providing any context for it other than the “picturesque” – it states the fact of a poor individual looking at a very expensive piece of camera equipment as something invisible or casual, when in fact it can be neither. Under the assumed innocence of the subject the image presumes to unveil the universality behind the gaze but is anything unveiled?

A National Geographic cover (October 1950) titled *Peru: Homeland to the Warlike Inca*. The look means much the same: This is “humanity in its natural state” – this is “pathos”. It is the “de-politicized speech” of which Barthes wrote when he described the black soldier on the cover of Paris Match in *Myth Today*. It's the look of a servant for a Patrona. That smile has a terrible history and photography for the most part willfully ignores it because that history is the very thing that must be suppressed. It eliminates complexity and contradiction in the exchange and gives us “the postcard subject” that

Bischoff saw in 1954. (To see this smile in all of its contradictions you can read Vargas Llosa's *Death in the Andes*) The woman in Lockhart's photo supplies to this myth a "historical reality" and what myth gives back, as Barthes explains in the same essay, is a faux "natural" image of this reality. In Starbucks the photographs of the two women and the man are there to illustrate the "drama" of *a-historical coffee production*: No we aren't slaves! We aren't even workers! Everything is clean – everything is pure – everything is right. In Lockhart's pictures what is illustrated is the "drama" of the *a-historical gaze*. *The Family of Man* exhibit returns again but now in color – but history can not be put on hold forever. The images that we can characterize as the photography of concern illustrate the particularities of human suffering and disaster – as it is being lived once more – turning them into an epithet of "natural" inevitability: *a-historical suffering*. At it's worst in the photography of concern human "types" illustrate the simplicity of an essence – a concept – that organizes the world for us and reduces it to a cliché.

Bischoff's first job for Magnum is to photograph a hospital in London. He buys a copy of the documentary film director Robert Flaherty's autobiography. He thinks of giving up photography to direct documentary films. In September 1953 Bischoff boards the *Liberte* in Le Havre and sets sail for New York. He begins to regain some of his faith in photography by visiting the Museum of Modern Art: "It still amazes me every time I enter MOMA and see that photography is the only truthful art form, the only one that relates directly to people". Later he describes the border between Texas and Mexico: "Two worlds meet here...a not-so-grand Rio Grande divides the Americans from the Latinos. This unexpected abrupt transition makes the way of life of the two peoples appear particularly extreme to me. Here the supermarket and affluence, but also uniformity and sterility – there the plazas, the corso and the little fruit stands, skillfully piled high...we try to avoid the tourist sights and often spend the night in villages and haciendas." On April 26th, 1954 he turned 38 in a hotel in Lima. "On Friday I'm going

into the Andes, into the mountains, the jungle, and to unknown people. Only for about eight days so I can learn a little more about the Peruvian world.”

Three weeks later the station wagon in which he is a passenger plunges into a gorge. Bischof and his two companions on the trip are killed. Some of the images he took were subsequently compiled in a now classic book called *From Incas to Indios* published in 1956; the book was finished by Pierre Verger and a young Swiss colleague named Robert Frank. That sentence resonates: “to unknown people...so I can learn a little more about the Peruvian world”. That is the world in which I grew up. I saw it over a period of years, slowly, rather than at his speed – that of a photojournalist. Yet I recognize the images in a way that I do not with the work of others. In contrast to the calculated panoramas or the facile portraits of most photojournalism, then and now, his images contain an enigmatic poetry. These images resonate with my memory. They are like most photojournalism records of a place and a time that has passed but they are also evocative metaphors for the human condition then and now. The people in them are allowed to “speak” for themselves and what they say is often not very pretty, in fact it is often not even intelligible – yet Bischof let’s them be. He does nothing really – almost nothing.

2004© George Porcari

Wener Bischof 1916-1954 His Life and Work Marco Bischof and Rene Burri
Thames & Hudson 1990

W. Eugene Smith and the Photographic Essay Glenn G. Willumson Cambridge
University Press 1992

Bystander: A History of Street Photography Colin Westerbeck, Joel Meyerowitz
Thames & Hudson 1994

Sharon Lockhart: Teatro Amazonas Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen Rotterdam 1999

Mythologies Roland Barthes Jonathan Cape Ltd. 1972 from Editions du Seuil 1957

From Incas to Indios Werner Bischof, Robert Frank, Pierre Verger Robert Delpire, Paris
Universe Books, New York 1956