Photography

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Introduction: An Oakland Bus Stop

Photography, at its most powerful, is a geographic medium unparalleled in shaping perceptions of place (van Gelder and Westgeest 2011). Whether viewed on a computer screen, in a gallery, through the pages of a book, or at a classroom lecture, photographic images of locations, near and far, can seem real and unmediated. They can transport people across vast distances of time and space.

This was made clear to me in early August 2010 at a bus stop in Oakland, California. I had just finished the first of a two-day oral history interview with Richard Misrach for the Smithsonian’s Archives of American Art (Misrach 2010a). As a way to help prepare for our discussion the following day, Misrach – an environmental photographer whose large-scale prints of bombing sites in the Nevada desert, petrochemical plants in Louisiana, and beaches in Hawaii have earned him international acclaim – lent me an advance copy of a forthcoming book. *Destroy This Memory* is large, measuring 15” x 11,” with the horizontal spine across the top, and printed at the highest possible quality in full color (Figure 1.1). Reading the book is like holding a slice of a museum in your hands with the pictures seeming to leap out from the page.

But that’s not putting it quite right. It’s more like a window through which viewers jump into another place – in this instance, post-Katrina New Orleans during the immediate months after the 2005 hurricane. Waiting for the bus back to Berkeley, I leafed through the photo book, lingering over every page, as the embattled city came into clear focus. New Orleans, through Richard Misrach’s lens, was unpeopled – not one person is seen in the 70 images – but the human impact on the devastated environment was immediate and loud. Seeing the landscape meant hearing it, too, as the words of local residents appeared at the center of each uncaptioned picture. Spray-painted messages in bright red, violet-blue, deep carrot orange, and ghost white gave voice to frantic pleas for help, stories of traumatic loss, and angry indictments. Although Misrach (2010b) let the words of residents speak for themselves with no interpretative text, he arranged the graffiti-laced photographs in a distinct narrative, beginning with despair (“help” and “fuck, fuck, fuck”) moving on to defiance (“I have a gun” or “to SOB that looted me I will kill you”) to gallows humor (“yard of the month” and “yep, Brownie, you did a heck of a job”) to a concluding, existential note (“what now?” “broken dreams,” “destroy this memory”). The effect on viewers is haunting.

And affective. Emotions of confusion, sympathy, frustration, and anger are ones that I heard expressed at the Oakland bus stop. Within minutes, more than a dozen fellow passengers, also waiting for the F bus, joined me in studying Misrach’s photographs. Sitting next to me and looking over my shoulder, they took turns thumbing through the photo book as I held it, stopping at every page, reading aloud its provocative words, and seeing the
wounded landscapes on which they were written. My bus stop companions offered shrewd, at times conflicting interpretations of the photographs’ meanings: some knew little about the hurricane and were astonished that such disaster could be wrought by natural forces, while others remembered it well and were chilled by what they saw to be indictments against governmental ineptitude. It was made clear to me that there was no single right way to read these visual images. But also clear is that, for everyone that afternoon at the small corner in Oakland, we were somehow having contact with a place and a time that affected us in profound and surprising ways. We were responding to the thereness of photography.

The Thereness of Photography

So was Roland Barthes, when he looked at a nineteenth-century photograph of the Alhambra in Granada, Spain. “This old photograph touches me,” he wrote, “it is quite simply there that I should like to live.” The experience that Barthes (1981: 38, 84) describes – the sense that he is looking directly at a slice of geographic reality, “an immediate presence to the world” – is foundational to the medium. And it’s not just among astute semiologists like Barthes that photographs exert the power of place. The most democratic of the geographic media, photography speaks an accessible language that’s both multivalent and open to anyone who pauses to look at what’s there.

“Thereness is a sense of the subject’s reality, a heightened sense of its physicality, etched sharply into the image,” writes Gerry Badger (2010: 17). “It is a sense that we are looking at
the world directly, without mediation.” Badger is describing the often-noted aura of machine objectivity that hangs over photographs, despite the subjective nature of both taking a picture and manipulating its visual qualities. It’s often easy to forget, when looking at photographs, that one is looking at a mediated reality instead of reality itself. Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright (2001: 17) call this the *myth of photograph truth* and note that “although we know that images can be ambiguous and are easily manipulated or altered … much of the power of photography still lies in the shared belief that photographs are objective or truthful records.”

This constant tension between photography and reality – a slippery relationship at once straightforward and enigmatic – can be found at the extreme ends of the photographic spectrum: from modest snapshots emerging from a Brownie camera or cell phone to the most serious “art” photographs. Walker Evans (1974: 95), himself a master of the art, recognized that even the most modest and banal postcards, produced as they often are “as a routine chore by heaven knows what anonymous photographer,” can be a “well-nigh perfect record of place.” Such photographs can simultaneously present evidence and evoke a magical quality that evades definition – resulting in a complex set of feelings and associations specifically because of the allegiance with thereness.

What’s more, the thereness of photographs means that such visual images “don’t only show us things, they *do* things. They engage us optically, neurologically, intellectually, viscerally, physically” (Heiferman 2012: 16). For my bus stop companions, photographs of Katrina-wrecked New Orleans demanded our scrutiny and interpretation, as they promoted conversation, stimulated thought, and shaped at least one person’s understanding of the unnatural metropolis. Conceiving photographs this way, on the one hand, helps move beyond an unproductive impasse within human geography, where “representation” is counterposed to something called “practice” or “performance.” As an agent of change, feeling, and affect, photography’s active role in the practices and performances of everyday life makes it an especially important geographic medium (Abel 2012).

On the other hand, recognizing the thereness of photography suggests something about geography. As Felix Driver (2003: 227) argues, the idea that geography is a particularly visual discipline has a long history and “isn’t simply the product of heightened anxiety about the politics of vision in recent cultural theory. For centuries, indeed, practitioners of the art of geography have been engaged in developing languages and techniques to capture what the eye could or should see in a landscape.” Photography emerged in the nineteenth century as an ideal instrument for geographic research and education, evolving from lantern slides and stereographic views to 35 mm slides and PowerPoint presentations (Figure 1.2). So successful has the camera been to visualize a slice of the world that, as Tuan (1979: 413) astutely observes, “in the classroom, a geography lecture without slides is as anomalous as an anatomy lecture without bones.”

Sometimes, as Gillian Rose (2003: 216; cf. Driver 2003; Matless 2003; Ryan 2003) observes, the photograph shown as a lecture slide “becomes the real,” the photographs “confirm the truth of our words.” This is an important point, and one that must be emphasized. It also should be extended beyond the geography classroom and become an initial point of departure for all photographic/geographic studies – namely, the recognition of the dual existence of photographs as physical objects and compelling imagery. Before a photograph can function as a representation of any kind, it begins its life as a three-dimensional thing, which has “volume, opacity, tactility, and a physical presence in the world” (Batchen 1997: 2). One might push this general observation even further to assert that a photograph’s material form (whether a gelatin silver print or the bytes of a digital file), no less than the image it bears, is fundamental to its function as an object that carries social and cultural meaning.

This essential observation is easy to overlook, especially when viewing photographs of visually arresting imagery. As Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart (2004: 2) argue, “the
prevailing tendency is that photographs are apprehended in one visual act, absorbing image and object together, yet privileging the former.” While image content – what is depicted in a photograph – remains the principle interest of most viewers, much is lost if we leave it at that. It’s worth considering, for example, this 1938 image of an isolated farm in the Texas panhandle by the American photographer Dorothea Lange (Figure 1.3). At one level, it offers evidence of the sort of vernacular structures and agricultural patterns that have long fascinated cultural geographers. Pushing a bit further, a geographer might take notice of the abandonment of the dwelling and the particularly neat rows of contour-plowed land surrounding it. Such descriptions, as important as they are, neglect the fact that Lange’s Texas photograph is a mediated representation that performs cultural work.

An approach to this photograph that is aware of its thereness begins with its status as a material object. It would, furthermore, acknowledge that Lange created this image with a specific agenda in mind, that it served her and other’s interests in competing ways. Finally, it would recognize that, over the years, the material object has circulated widely as different viewerships have seen it in multiple contexts. As a key member of President Franklin Roosevelt’s Farm Security Administration (FSA), Lange was commissioned to
photographically document the social and economic relationships of American agricultural labor during the Great Depression. She became a severe critic of that system, using her photographs to expose its structural inequalities. This becomes evident only when the photograph’s full caption, as Lange intended it, is matched to the image itself: “Tractored Out: Power farming displaces tenants from the land in the western dry cotton area, Childress County, Texas Panhandle, June 1938.” Far from a value-neutral picture of a Texas landscape, Lange’s photograph simmers with indignation and moral conviction (Spirn 2009).

Image makers like Dorothea Lange seductively deployed the thereness of photography to stake her claims about the troubled and uneven nature of American capitalist development. Other photographers may also strive to present a visual argument, but, like Trevor Paglen, are simultaneously concerned with the slippery relationship between photography and what is depicted. Trained as a geographer and a photographer, Paglen recognizes a contemporary suspicion of representation – “the days of believing that there’s something out there in the world that can be transparently represented by a photograph or image are over” – at least in the realm of critical theory and the art world (quoted in Stallabrass 2011: 8). But rather than either retreating to pure abstraction or eschewing the visual altogether, he embraces the performative act of photography. Indeed, for Paglen photography is all about exploring limits – limits of visibility, representation, knowledge, and democratic society.
Each photograph he takes can be regarded as a record of political performance as he insists on his right to bring his camera to public space and document what is otherwise invisible.

And it is the generally invisible – and purposefully so – that intrigues Paglen and compels him to document the hidden spaces of military power. He has taken thousands of photographs of the “black world” – the covert defense projects and infrastructure that has grown exponentially since the Bush administration’s 2001 declared War on Terror. In some cases, he uses high-end optical lenses designed for astronomical photography to document secret military bases in the United States. In others, he makes use of data generated by amateur satellite watchers to track and photograph classified spacecraft in the earth’s orbit. “Nine Reconnaissance Satellites over Sonora Pass” from 2008 (Figure 1.4) is an example of the latter series and presents viewers with an immediate and interesting contradiction. With its striking, multicolored symmetrical lines set against the deep black background, the photograph is a four-hour time-lapse exposure of the northern sky over the Sierra Nevada. It at once belongs to the art world,¹ but its full significance only becomes apparent when considering the social process that went into making it. For the artist, it is an exposé of the “legal ‘nowhere’ that nourishes the worst excesses of power” (Paglen 2010: 276).

Figure 1.4  Trevor Paglen, Nine Reconnaissance Satellites over Sonora Pass, 2008
Source: Trevor Paglen; Altman Siegel, San Francisco; Metro Pictures, New York; Galerie Thomas Zander

¹ Paglen is represented by the same Chelsea gallery, Metro Pictures, that represents superstar artists like Cindy Sherman, and his photographs have been exhibited at the world’s most prestigious venues, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and the Tate Modern, London.
Making the “nowhere” of covert operations into a somewhere through the troubled yet continued relevance of photography’s thereness is what gives Paglen’s work its geographic immediacy and political relevance.

The photographic work of Trevor Paglen, Dorothea Lange, and Richard Misrach point to something else – namely, that it behooves geographers to pay close attention to the work of photographers. This point is picked up by James R. Ryan (2003: 235), who notes that “geographers have tended to see the work of visual artists as merely illustrative of textual ideas or, at best, something to be deconstructed from a distance.” Instead, he argues that there is much to be gained from a sustained dialogue between these two spheres. A sustained dialogue must, by definition, narrow the conversation to give it substance and depth, especially so with this ubiquitous, accessible medium. What makes photography – defined by its close, thorny connection with reality – ideal to enlist for politics and to illustrate things, also makes it elusive and easy to underestimate (Hoelscher 2012). A case-study perspective, one that engages critically with images and sociocultural context, would seem to offer the most direct route to photography’s thereness.

In the following sections, I explore the possibilities of such a dialogue between geography and photography by closely examining the geographic lenses of one photo agency – Magnum Photos. Not only does Magnum – now in its seventh decade – offer a range of approaches and ways of handling the medium, it also has a distinctly geographic way of seeing and visually describing the world. Because photographs so seamlessly enter the relationship between observer and material reality, they have become “a functioning tool of the geographic imagination,” write Schwartz and Ryan (2003: 3). The relationship becomes even more interesting when considering the work of photographers, like many associated with this particular photo agency, whose specific objective is to create visual records that actively shape perceptions of place. Exploring something of Magnum’s geographical imagination sheds light on how geography and photography can be mutually entwined to the benefit of each.

The Geographical Imagination of a Photo Agency

In 1947, in the wake of the Second World War’s unprecedented destruction, four of the most prominent photographers to cover that shattering event had a unique idea: to form a photographic cooperative that would allow for the creation and dissemination of visual images unencumbered by the constraints of for-profit photojournalism. The experience of the war and its aftermath called into question the very foundation of Western civilization and its traditional means of conveying visual information. The resulting organization – Magnum Photos – has since become one of the modern world’s most influential photographic communities, producing images of great diversity and distinction that have been viewed the world over.

It has been long understood that for Henri Cartier-Bresson, photography was a temporal matter. The decisive moment, he famously said, is the “simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event.” But it was also, for this Magnum founder, a spatial concern: “the [re]discovery of the world around us” (Cartier-Bresson 1952: n.p.). Sometimes those worlds embody excruciating pain and at other times exuberant joy; they can exhibit breathtaking beauty or bleak unsightliness. Regardless of what they look

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2 This section is derived, with considerable modification, from Hoelscher (2013).
like, photographs of decisive places demonstrate the relationship between people and their environment as they shed light on other places without giving up their specificity – they create a distinct sense of that place.

“Place,” no less than “story,” is a central, organizing concept of the Magnum archive. As Chris Boot (2000: 4) has documented, “story” is “etched into the way Magnum has organized its work.” Ever since the photo agency’s beginning, “story” is a term used to “describe any body of work, whether an account of an historical event, or a set of entirely personal pictures,” or a commercial, commissioned assignment. Thus, a “story” comprises photographs as diverse as Dennis Stock’s pictures of James Dean walking through a rainy Times Square in 1955, Bruno Barbey’s of the 1968 Paris street riots, or Susan Meiselas’s mid-1970s series on American carnival strippers.

What each of these “stories” has in common is its geographic referent. As Matthew Murphy (2010), Magnum’s current New York bureau archivist, explains, “the ‘story’ is a concept which defines a series of photographs, which have in common a place, anything from a kitchen to a continent.” From a purely organizational perspective, it hardly matters if the resulting photograph ends up in a corporate annual report, a magazine cover, a textbook, or a gallery wall: in most cases, Magnum arranged its stories geographically, giving an otherwise potentially amorphous organizational system a common thread.

Significantly, that thread was there from the beginning. The 1947 certificate of incorporation for Magnum Photos, Inc., seeks as its mission: “to engage in a photographic, portrait, picture, and painting business; to make ... representations of persons, places, landscapes, and scenes ... and to carry on the business of photography in all its branches, in any part of the world” (quoted in Miller 1997: 52–53). A business model that defined Magnum’s objectives in distinctly geographical terms is hardly surprising, given its early dependency on the picture magazines of the day. Moreover, it aligned the fledgling cooperative with the long history of photography itself. Photography, as one of the medium’s earliest proponents declared in 1858, did something quite unique: through photographs, the world was “made familiar” and “brought in intense reality to our very hearths” (Price 1858: 1–2). This is to say that photographic images – from daguerreotypes in the nineteenth century to halftone reproductions in newspapers and magazines in the twentieth century to digital files on the Internet today – have played a major role in the making and dissemination of geographical knowledge (Schwartz and Ryan 2003). Magnum, with its ever-regenerating group of influential photographers, has been vital to that endeavor.

In order to achieve its goal of carrying the business to “any part of the world,” each of the original photographers was assigned a world region: David “Chim” Seymour would cover Europe; Bill Vandivert had the United States; George Rodger was assigned the Middle East and Africa; Cartier-Bresson had Asia; while Robert Capa – the driving force behind Magnum’s founding – was free to take on roaming assignments wherever stories might appear. As George Rodger put it, Magnum was formed, at least in part, to “make our own lives easier so that we could operate, each in his own field” – “field” meaning here both a particular photographic vision and geographic territory (Rodger quoted in Hill and Cooper 1979: 67).

Magnum’s geographic project emerged, according to Ernst Haas, at a “time when the world had to be rediscovered.” Like his early Magnum colleagues, Haas simultaneously felt alienated from his home (he emigrated from postwar Vienna upon acceptance into Magnum and rarely returned) and also possessed by “a tremendous wanderlust.” Emerging from the toxic cauldron of World War II, when place after place was “destroyed and separated,”

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3 Because one of the charter members, Bill Vandivert, left Magnum one year after its founding, Robert Capa took over responsibilities for the US photographs.
Haas found that “suddenly there was peace and everybody ... wanted to know each other” (quoted in Sanghvi 1981: 16, 21). The idealistic internationalism at the heart of such sentiments was strongly influenced by larger political, ideological, and cultural imperatives to conceive a world beyond national boundaries and removed from a fascist ideology that emphasized racial and cultural “purity.” The founders of Magnum, deeply influenced by the era’s unrestrained atrocities, were substantial participants in an imperative that sought to create a world different from the one that led to two world wars. Visually describing what that world might look like – embracing photography’s thereness and making it the cooperative’s aesthetic principle – became Magnum’s immediate raison d’être.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the geographies that “had to be rediscovered” by Magnum photographers initially emphasized human experiences that transcended cultural and spatial differences. Earliest and most influential was an ambitious comparative photo-essay conceived by John G. Morris, recently hired as Editor at Ladies’ Home Journal and soon to become the first and legendary Executive Editor of Magnum Photos. As Morris (1948: 43) put it, the photo-essay would “explain people to people in intimate, vivid terms, taking them not country by country, but trait by trait.” More important than highlighting dissimilarity and conflict, the “series would show families in [12] countries every month, as they went about their quotidian business and engaged in the common preoccupations of humankind.”

The resulting 12-issue series – titled “People are the World Over” and published between May 1948 and 1949 in both Ladies Home Journal and the German picture magazine Heute – proved to be a financial boon to the new photo agency (Figure 1.5). It also became a template for group projects to follow – and from which to depart.

With text by Morris and photos by Magnum members and three freelancers, the project adhered to a very strict script. In addition to making a family portrait, Morris prescribed the following scenarios: farming, cooking, eating, washing, bathing, playing, shopping, worshipping, relaxing at home, traveling, sleeping. The series was designed to satisfy Journal readers’ curiosity about the geographies emerging from the embers of war ruin, and what they saw must have been comforting. Month after month, the visual evidence supplied by Capa et al. seemed to demonstrate that “people are pretty much people, no matter where you find them” (Morris 1948: 43).

By highlighting images of shared underlying values, “People Are People” was a direct contradiction of racist and fascist ideology. It also proved to be a great popular and commercial success. It inspired Robert Capa to launch an equally ambitious group project later that very year, called “Generation X,” which sought to compare the postwar generation in 12 different countries. More noteworthy, “People Are People” was a major inspiration for Edward Steichen’s seminal 1955 “The Family of Man” exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. Arguably one of the most influential photography exhibits ever made, “The Family of Man” relied heavily on Magnum not only for its conception but also for many of its 500-some photographs (Sandeen 1995).

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4 Much has been said about the impact the war had on the founders of Magnum: Seymour, whose Polish-Jewish family was murdered by the Nazi war machine; Cartier-Bresson, who spent three years as a POW and only escaped on his third try; Capa whose journey through the horrors of fascist-driven warfare famously began with the Spanish Civil War; and Rogers, whose war photographs ranged from the London Blitz of 1939 to the liberation of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp.

5 The sole, and notable exception, is Cartier-Bresson, whom Morris believed would not be able to “follow such a simplistic script” and was thus not included (Morris 1998: 116).

6 Photographs from the following members or future members were included: Eve Arnold, Werner Bischof, Cornell Capa, Robert Capa, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Elliott Erwitt, Burt Glinn, Ernst Haas, George Rodger, Wayne Miller, David “Chim” Seymour, and W. Eugene Smith.
Figure 1.5  “Menschen wie du und ich” [People Are People the World Over], a page from the July 1, 1948, edition of Heute

Source: Information Control Division, US Army
While the influence of “The Family of Man” remains strong (its catalog, after selling more than 4 million copies, is still in print), the ideological framework – what Michael Ignatieff (2003: 54) later called “liberal moral universalism” – has fared less well. The liberalism of the postwar era was not to go unchallenged, even in its photographic expression. In 1957, Roland Barthes (1972: 100) disparaged the “sentimental humanism” of “The Family of Man” and questioned whether the broad generalizations about shared human experiences describe the world in its full geographical complexity. One can plausibly argue that “Family of Man” expressed the “core belief” of Magnum’s founders; it is no coincidence that Steichen’s assistant at MoMA, Wayne Miller, became a member of Magnum in 1958. Twenty years later, Susan Sontag (1977: 33) argued that “by purporting to show that individuals are born, work, laugh, and die everywhere in the same way, ‘The Family of Man’ denies the determining weight of history – of genuine and historically embedded differences, injustices, and conflicts.”

If this were all there was to Magnum’s geographical project, the photo agency would surely not have survived, at least in its recognizable form. Although traces of a wish to find shared values across place remain, more recognizable is what Barthes also called a “progressive humanism.” In contrast with sentimental humanism’s search for a “rock solid of a universal human nature,” a progressive inflection takes seriously the profound differences across the humanly constructed world. For Barthes (1972: 102), “progressive humanism” constantly “scours nature, its ‘laws’ and its ‘limits’ in order to discover History there, and at least to establish Nature as historical.” Such an approach denies the supposition that people are basically the same under the veneer of culture, but also emphasizes the way that something – whether political-economic power or a shared historical experience – connects people from very different geographies. If sentimental humanism was premised on the belief in a common human nature beneath the incredible diversity of human beliefs, values, and geographies, then Barthes’s progressive humanism finds this to be a myth.

In existence for more than 60 years, Magnum has successfully adapted progressive humanism as it has grown, diversified, and created ever-new conceptual frameworks for rediscovering the world. That is not to say that Magnum photographs have one “look” or point of view. With their broad conceptions of place – “anything from a kitchen to a continent” – Magnum photographers possess strikingly diverse geographical imaginations, which are recurrently reflected in their work. Some, like Bruce Gilden, frequently focus on the interplay of behavior and customs in urban spaces, while others, like Steve McCurry, emphasize regions where cultures and languages collide. Still other photographers, like Larry Towell, directly acknowledge their geographical imagination. Towell (2013) notes, “if there’s one theme that connects all my work, I think it’s that of landlessness; how land makes people into who they are and what happens to them when they lose it and thus lose their identities.” Similarly, Jonas Bendiksen’s continuing project of isolated communities and enclaves goes by the name “The Places We Live.” While Gilles Peress is perhaps less explicit about how geographical imaginations play a role in his work, observers have noted how his projects ranging from Teheran and Belfast exhibit a distinct “politics of space” (Kozloff 1994: 170–77). Contemporary Magnum members, through a diverse set of geographical imaginations, share with their predecessors an enduring dedication to photographing “the world as it is.”

By “geographical imagination,” I simply mean a heightened sensitivity toward the importance of space, place, and environment in the making and meaning of social and cultural life on earth (Harvey 2005). Bringing that sensitivity to bear on their projects is

7 Ignatieff astutely observes that Magnum’s liberalism developed in conjunction with the United Declaration of Human Rights, drafted in the aftermath of World War II.

8 A similar critique comes from Catherine A. Lutz and Jane L. Collins (1993: 277–78).
what enables many Magnum photographers to picture places as “decisive” and not as mere backdrops to important personalities or events. Cartier-Bresson, for one, was greatly influenced by the anarchist geographer, Élisée Reclus (1830–1905), and his belief that political emancipation and parity among global peoples and cultures goes hand in hand. Others, like Stuart Franklin, are geographers by training (he received BA and PhD degrees in geography from Oxford University). Yet, Magnum’s photographers have been imbued more generally with a “habit of mind” that spirals well beyond the walls of the academy. They would seem to have taken in Reclus’s central educational point that “It’s outside of school that one learns the most, in the street, in the workshop, at the stalls of a fair, at the theatre, in railroad cars and on steamboats, in new landscapes and foreign cities” (quoted in Galassi 2010: 29).

Put differently, geographical imaginations are triggered by personal experience, but also by the visual and aural representations that we find in a variety of media, including photography. With both intellectual passion and modesty, Mikheal Subotzky (2013), one of Magnum’s most recent nominees, describes his approach to photography’s thereness: “For me, photography has become a way of attempting to make sense of the very strange world that I see around me. I don’t ever expect to achieve that understanding, but the fact that I am trying comforts me.”

Magnum’s photographers seek to make sense of the world around them through a number of geographic lenses, two of which stand out: exploration/travel and insider/outsider visions. The progressive humanism at work in photographs of decisive places suggests a persisting attempt to rediscover the world, to constantly question what is purported to be good, natural, and universal. Magnum’s unique commitment to long-term, in-depth projects made such questioning possible and created photographs with evocative senses of place.

Decisive Places: Magnum’s Geographic Lenses

Exploration/Travel

Photographers, whether on assignment for a magazine or working on personal projects, visually document the places they visit and the people who inhabit them. Beginning with George Rodger in Africa, Magnum’s systematic geographic coverage of the world for the benefit of viewing audiences elsewhere make it part of a long-established tradition. To be sure, at the very core of the medium, photographic images provided the opportunity for vicarious visual exploration of distant places. Photography might be originally rooted in the development of pictorial illustration, but travel soon became part of the argument surrounding the announcement of Daguerre’s 1839 invention. His method of mechanically capturing an image of the world, one proponent claimed, was predicted to become “an object of continual and indispensible use” to the traveler, enabling “every author ... to compose the geographical part of his own work” (quoted in Goldberg 1988: 22). And, indeed, very soon travelers equipped themselves with daguerreotype outfits and stereoscopic cameras “to take on itineraries established by historical tradition and the parameters of their country’s influence” (Hambourg 1996: 33; see also Schwartz 1996). It is a very short step from the mid-nineteenth-century daguerreotype or stereoscopic view to the mid-twentieth-century National Geographic: both served as a surrogate for travel for primarily middle-class audiences.

Thus, while George Rodger might have been the first photographer to record some portions of Africa during his epic travels across the continent in 1948, in fact, he was working in the long shadow of others documenting “unknown” geographies. He began his long career as “a photographic voyageur,” as someone belonging to “the great tradition of
explorers and adventurers,” when he enlisted in the Merchant Navy as a teenager. He then became famous as a British freelance photographer who purportedly traveled 75,000 miles covering the remote perimeter of the war in Africa and Asia before documenting the Allied invasion of Europe (Naggar 2003). He famously gave up war photography, for which he had acquired such a sterling reputation, when he reflected on his way of taking pictures at the liberation of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. Rodger was appalled that he treated “this pitiful human flotsam as if it were a gigantic still-life,” he later recalled. “It wasn't even a matter of what I was photographing as what had happened to me in the process. When I discovered that I could look at the horror of Belsen … and think only of a nice photographic composition, I knew something had happened to me and I had to stop. I said this is where I quit.” Photography, Rodgers seemed to be saying, could not only link people to places, but also drive them away. While this has been most commonly interpreted as Rodger’s response to the brutality and dehumanizing effect of war, it may also be surmised that the dehumanization that he opposed came from his camera – or, the specific photographic response to atrocity (Boot 2004: 402).

Africa became the place where Rodger (1999: ii) hoped to find respite – “some spot in the world that was clean and untrammeled” – from those horrors. Months after Magnum's founding, he began a two-year, 28,000-mile journey across Africa, from Johannesburg to the Mediterranean. Along the way, he photographed South Africa, Uganda, Swaziland, Zaire, Tanzania, Egypt, and Sudan, sending his images to the Magnum office in Paris for distribution to magazines across Europe and the United States. Perhaps more than most photographers, writing served as an equal partner in “composing the geographical part” of his travels, at least initially. Rodger was a leader in developing the “package story,” which combined text with images. Thus, in place after place, he took detailed fieldnotes that became the basis for extensive captions and narratives to accompany his photographs.

His detailed package story on the Nuba of Kordofan is arguably his best example. For two weeks, in February and March 1949, Rodger photographed and wrote about a place that he believed embodied the peace and idyllic repose he was searching for. While Africa, including Sudan, was undergoing massive political and social upheavals associated with postcolonial transformation, Rodger instead focused on a region as far removed as possible from those struggles. “I traveled thousands of miles to see if somewhere, in some remote corner, there was not still a little of the old Africa that had been seen by men like Brazza and Livingstone,” he wrote in the text to accompany his photographs. “I found it at last in Kordofan” (Rodger 1949: ii).

What Rodger found both dazzled and perplexed him. The mountainous landscape that made the region so inaccessible to outsiders, the exotic ceremonies and traditions, the bewildering interactions among individuals and groups: Rodger struggled to make sense of what he encountered during his travels. Most puzzling of all were the wrestling matches and the bracelet fighting ceremony. As Rodger’s biographer notes, he was “thrown into the heart of a ceremony he did not understand, performed by a people he knew little about” (Naggar 2003: 181). Rodger’s photographs alternatively reflect that disorientation and his attempt to make sense of what he was seeing on his own, Western terms. One striking example is his picture from the interior of a Nuba house (Figure 1.6).

In this photograph, a man is captured, midstride, walking through the dwelling’s entrance. Unlike other captions that Rodger wrote to accompany his photographs – captions that provide considerable ethnographic detail to the layout of a house, the kitchen utensils, the physical appearance of people, and their exotic customs – this one was originally

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9 Rodger’s June 29, 1995, obituary in the *New York Times* went by the title “Death of an Adventurer.” See also 75,000 miles (1942).
Figure 1.6  George Rodger, The Keyhole Entrance to a Nuba House in the Korongo Jebels Mountains, Kordofan, Sudan, 1949

Source: Magnum Photos
described in the briefest terms: “A man of the Mesakin Qasar Nuba returns through his keyhole doorway in the evening, carrying a gourd.” For a man who determinedly refused to consider himself an artist, Rodger did much more with this picture than simply make a visual record of his travels: the photograph’s superb interplay of light and dark, shadow and reflection, geometric shape and symmetry suggest someone who had not abandoned photographic composition at the gates of Bergen-Belsen.

These photographs thus depict a place simultaneously isolated – a geography “around which nature has built a protective wall against Western invasion,” as Rodger put it – and, from today’s perspective, anachronistic and a little naïve. Several decades after his first photographs of the Nuba brought world attention to the region, photographic safaris were organized as part of a global tourism infrastructure. And when Magnum photographers document Sudan today they picture a very different place, one marked by the violence of ethnic and civil wars, and where the reverberations of postcolonial life are felt through and through. By contrast, Rodger’s Kordofan region of Sudan is peaceful, insulated, and tranquil. It is a place that seems to have vanished from the earth.

Gone as well is the kind of explorer that Rodger worked so hard to be. Magnum photographers remain inveterate travelers, skimming the globe at ever increasing rates and taking pictures of the world as it is. But they can no longer leave home for weeks, or months, and maintain only minimal contact with the home office. Increasingly, the nature of travel itself has become the subject of their photography, none more so than in the work of Martin Parr, someone more likely to focus on the safaris of camera-touting tourists in Africa than either its endangered traditional cultures or the military forces that have wrecked the continent.

Parr is interested in the absurdities and incongruities of the modern world, and the ways that ordinary people try to navigate it. The tourism industry is central to that navigation, and in it Parr finds much that is simultaneously amusing and poignant. One of his first major projects, “The Last Resort” (1983–1986), satirically documented the tourist destination of New Brighton, a dilapidated seaside resort, which had seen better days. With his now trademark style of saturated color and uncompromising directness, he pictured the English working class trying to sneak a few hours of leisure time by sunbathing under looming construction equipment, waiting among the perspiring hordes at grubby lunch counters, and dipping their feet into trash-strewn water.

The work was controversial – some critics found it “aggressive” and “cynical” – but also groundbreaking, and helped Parr gain entry into Magnum (Williams 2002). At this time, partly as a result of the increased travel for commercial assignments that the agency made possible, Parr expanded his work from the local to the global, and eventually to a large-scale project on global tourism, “Small World,” of the early 1990s. Whether photographing souvenir vendors at the Giza pyramids in Egypt or rain-soaked Japanese tourists in a Hawaii visitor-center boat, Parr’s greatest interest seems to be the disjunction between geographical expectation and reality that is endemic to the modern traveler experience. There are the guidebooks and Web sites that promise one version of Athens, and then there is the modern Greek capital, flooded with travelers of all varieties, who invariably change the experience of visiting the place.

Some might be disappointed by that disjunction, but, for Parr, the gap between myth and reality functions as a central element of the modern world and is therefore worth documenting. When he was recently asked by American Photo magazine to choose the “Ten Places You Must Photograph,” Parr picked Rome “because of the quality of its tourists.” He says that “when most travel photographers go to some destination the last thing they want to see are tourists, but that’s usually the first thing I want to see.” And what better destination than Rome?
Here you have the Eternal City, which is fundamentally one of the most magical cities, exquisitely beautiful, and what you notice are all the people who have come to be part of it. To me, people are much more interesting than ruins. People move around and change. Ruins just sit there and do nothing. (Parr 2008: 62–63)

With his flash-on camera and its resulting combination of garish color, and raw, off-kilter framing, Parr presents Rome with both affection and skepticism (Figure 1.7). His 1993 photograph of the Spanish Steps really is not about the famous landscape, but instead about the people who travel there see it, how they react to it, and (by implication) how they experience it. It’s more about a distinct sense of place than about landscape – an experience of place that treats the site itself as if it were something to be viewed rather than lived in. And in this case, not even something to be viewed, but passed through. Sometimes, as the picture’s focal point suggests, tourists spend as much time planning where to go next on their itinerary, reading guidebooks and maps, with a back to the destination, and checking off places from their “must see” lists.

Upon seeing this and other photographs from his 1995 “Small World” exhibition, Henri Cartier-Bresson famously told Parr, “I have only one thing to say to you. You are from a completely different planet” (quoted in Miller 1997: 297). Part of the intergalactic difference, of course, concerned style, especially the distinction between color and black-and-white photography. Part also is the playful irony that consistently runs through Parr’s travel photographs. But perhaps the Magnum founder meant something more literal as well; after all, no less than Cartier-Bresson, Parr uses surrealist techniques of juxtaposition and

Figure 1.7     Martin Parr, The Spanish Steps, Rome, Italy, 1993
Source: Magnum Photos
dislocation, which then often raise questions about what is normal in a given place. It is just that those places had changed beyond recognition, with mass tourism as a leading force in those transformations. Photography, through the lens of Martin Parr, incessantly challenges preconceived assumptions, as it concurrently reinforces a sense that we, as viewers, are there. Never merely a “record of simple truth and precision” – although it is that – a photograph is also the product of imagination as it shapes perceptions of place (Schwartz 2000).

Inside/Outside

A second geographic lens was recently articulated by Bruce Davidson (2009: 9) when, reflecting on his 50-year career, he said that “I often find myself an outsider on the inside discovering beauty and meaning in the most desperate of situations.” Magnum’s members frequently document places across the chasms of gender, race, class, and national origins. Nowhere, however, is the sense of an “inside” and an “outside” – of intimacy and exposure, of private life and public space, of being in place and out of place – better seen than in Davidson’s landmark *East 100th Street.*

“What you call a ghetto, I call my home,” Davidson (1970: n.p.) recalls hearing from residents of the East Harlem neighborhood that became his photographic subject during the mid-1960s. The sense of essential difference – between himself as a white, middle-class professional photographer and his photographic subjects, the black and Hispanic people who lived in what was then known as New York’s “worst slum” – remained throughout the two-year personal project, but it was a difference that he strived to overcome (Klein 1968: 32). Occasionally compared to Jacob Riis and his photographs of New York’s “ghettos,” Davidson purposively eschewed his predecessor’s sensationalistic voyeurism (Sontag 1977: 56). He furthermore abandoned the small, handheld camera that had become the Magnum trademark, choosing, instead, to work with a large view camera on tripod, which delivered images of a sharpness, depth of field, and precision superior to those produced with 35 mm film.

More importantly, it also meant that Davidson recast himself from street photographer working in the reportage tradition into the role of neighborhood photographer, a recognizable and trusted person who was allowed access to households, streets, and business that his outsider status would have otherwise denied. Less important than dramatic narrative was a concern for the ability of photography to “evoke an indefinable sense of place” – at least according to the Museum of Modern Art, which exhibited 43 photographs in 1970 (MoMA 1970). This is how Davidson (1970: n.p.) described his intentions:

*The presence of a large format camera on a tripod, with its bellows and black focusing cloth, gave a sense of dignity to the act of taking pictures. I didn’t want to be the unobserved observer. I wanted to be with my subjects face to face and for them to collaborate in my taking the picture.*

Such collaboration would only be possible with community participation and support, an ethnographic basic that Davidson had learned from his earlier work with Brooklyn gangs, and with the Freedom Rides and Civil Rights movement. He worked with local religious leaders and the members of the neighborhood citizens’ committee, who agreed that he could take a few pictures and then present them for review. After receiving approval from both the committee and the families of the first photographs, Davidson began going to the block every day, carrying an album of sample photographs that he showed to people he hoped to photograph. He eventually gave away several thousand prints to residents, and invited community members to MoMA’s opening.
Some community members were coming to see themselves. A few of the published photographs were of the cityscape: alleys strewn with garbage, distant vistas of the block from a rooftop, the interior courtyard of a tenement building. Most, however, were “environmental portraits”: people across the age spectrum, in their personal space, whether outdoors, on the street, or on front stoop, or indoors, in a bedroom or kitchen or basement.

“During the two years I photographed East 100th Street, NASA was sending probes into outer space,” Davidson (1970: n.p.) wrote years later. “I wanted to see instead into the inner space of the city.”

That inner space might have been terra incognita for the majority of the city’s white residents, who knew only of the block’s sordid reputation, but for its residents, the block of East 100th Street, between First and Second Avenues, was something much more complex. The range of environmental portraits articulates a heightened sense of that complexity, individuality, and ambiguity, and refrains from the objectification that came so easily to photographers documenting the lives of “others.” Some photographs show people worn out by the incessant struggle of living in poverty, while others appear more rebellious and proud in difficult circumstances; some people seem vulnerable, but others suggest resistance. In each case, Davidson sought to portray what had been previously treated as an abstract concept (namely, urban poverty) into a geography of clearly delineated worlds.

In this photograph, two young girls sit on one end of a blanket-covered couch in the family’s sparse living room (Figure 1.8). Wearing lovely, Sunday-best dresses they look directly at the camera lens. Behind the girls, a window offers a view of the city beyond. The girls and their parents may have played an active role in defining their pose, but the point of view was the photographer’s. Windows, with their tenuous yet impervious borders between public and private, are a central feature of Davidson’s series. Sometimes the view is from outside looking in, but more common, as in this photograph, is the interior view showing the world beyond. Davidson put it this way: “I wanted to explore not only the rooms, but what you saw out the window, across the courtyard and into infinity. Not only the room, but what the room saw” (quoted in Vanderbilt 2003: 9). It was a view that he had never seen before and the result is an awkwardness and tension that appears in many of the photographs. Davidson certainly achieved his goal of earning the trust of many in the community, and he was able to create a documentary record of a neighborhood in transition. Nevertheless, an unbridgeable barrier remained and helped create the tension that runs through such images.

For many viewers, it is precisely this tension that gives the East 100th Street photographs their power – and their controversy. The collaborative process, for Carl A. Kramer (1971), endows Davidson’s project with its “total honesty” and its evocation of a “real piece of the world,” while for the *New Yorker*’s reviewer, it made for a “fatal loss of spontaneity.” A.D. Coleman’s review comes to a rather different conclusion. While applauding Davidson for his “sincerity of motives [and] his commitment” to those he pictured, Coleman (1970) finds that “something is being kept back by the subjects” and by Davidson himself: “there is a caution in his eyes as well as in those of his subjects.” Paradoxically, the unarticulated, but nonetheless very real tension generated by photographing across lines of sociogeographical separation, bestow the photographs with their most damning quality: beauty. “Davidson has transmuted a truth which is not beautiful into an art which is.” For Coleman, better models for such a project are the “strong, simple, artless” reform photographs of Lewis Hine and Jacob Riis (see also Reinhart et al. 2007).

Davidson is clearly aware of such criticism, but to him it is beside the point. He notes that when he lent cameras to some of the local residents, they “don’t photograph the slums. They photograph their friends … all sort of possibilities, without sentimentality. They photograph the life they know, not its horrors.” And it was not uncommon for Davidson to see his own “beautiful” photographs hanging on the walls of the homes of
people he had pictured. His photographs neither glorify the neighborhood nor dwell on its very real social problems – though its scars and pain are evident. Instead, by simultaneously acknowledging and collaborating across the socioracial divide that inevitably separated himself from the residents of this community, he produced a photographic record of a place thick with texture, individuality, and dignity.

Visual images, no less than language, can assume a critical role in the creation of place – in this case, a new place that most New Yorkers had never seen before. Photography alone cannot mold the natural world. But it can direct attention to things formerly overlooked – invisible and seemingly nonexistent – as it also organizes apparently insignificant entities into significant composite wholes (Tuan 1991). Although not a professional geographer, Davidson clearly understood something about the complex, constitutive relationship between photography and place.

Figure 1.8  Bruce Davidson, *East 100th Street, New York City, 1966*
*Source:* Magnum Photos

Conclusion

Photographs by Bruce Davidson, and all his colleagues at Magnum, suggest a very particular way of seeing that has two, distinct components. First they exhibit a sense of place that is an open and progressive force in the world. A sense of place – that deeply personal way that people think and feel about the world they live in – will obviously vary from individual
to individual, including Magnum’s photographers. But what many share is a progressive sense of place that, by its very definition, links to places beyond, all the while maintaining its distinctiveness. Christopher Anderson (2012) captures this progressive sense of place when he describes his work as an exploration of the “relationship between politics, economics, consumption, and the earth. I approach the topic … by looking at how consumption in the developed world creates the conditions for further destruction of the earth in the developing world, specifically Latin America” (see also Massey 1994: 146–56).

Second, and more broadly, they demonstrate an ambitious engagement with the therereness of photography. One of the photo agency’s most recent members, Peter van Agtmael (2012), put it this way: “For me, reality is inevitably more interesting, more strange, than anything created purely by the imagination.” In many ways, he was echoing a deep tradition within documentary photography, with roots in the work of Lange and Cartier-Bresson that seeks to document “things as they are.” But the paradox, of course, is that such work “creatively interpret[s] and translate[s] the chaos of life into a product that can be distributed to readers” (Panzer 2005: 10). And, as sophisticated photographers like Agtmael would immediately acknowledge, the business of representing reality is very much about imagination or, as his Magnum colleague Philip Jones Griffiths once said, it’s about “making caustic comments” about what you see (quoted in Miller 1997: 211).

Such a perspective has clear resonance with those who also want to explore the relationship between people and the world around them, and it behooves geographers to pay close attention to creators of this important visual medium. As I have tried to argue (and hopefully demonstrate) in this chapter, the very ubiquity of photography and its unique relationship with the observable world demand an approach that favors depth over surface. Such an approach embraces and interrogates the thereness of photography, rather than backing away from the troublesome nature of representation. It recognizes that photographs are not just things to be looked and used for evidence, but should be the source of questions. They can function as puzzles to decode, sites of performance, and embodiments of emotion. This is not always easy to do, especially living in a world awash with photographs that multiply at an ever-accelerated rate – by some estimates, more than 100 million photographs are uploaded to Facebook every day. Photographs are so omnipresent, so multifaceted, so powerful that the medium changes everything; from where we go, what we want, and what we do, to what we see, what we remember, and who we are (Heiferman 2012). And yet, as Abigail Solomon-Godeau (1994: xxi) notes, photography is “a medium whose very ubiquity may well have fostered its invisibility as an object of study.” This is regrettable, given the profound ability of photographs to shape perceptions and understandings of place. Sometimes it’s best simply to slow down, look closely at the images that envelope us, think about the social conditions and effects of visual objects, and consider what each of us brings to the bus stop. Developing a critical, geographical methodology for studying photography is as simple – and complex – as that (Rose 2012: 16–17).

References


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