Conscious and Semi-Conscious States of the Camera

Comments on a History of Photographic Parapraxes

In the early days of photography, one of the disappointments in connection with the new medium was that these photos did not necessarily resemble what was commonly regarded as a "picture." Merely framing segments of reality in photographs did not make "pictures" (Jeffrey, 1993). The processing mechanism of this new image-making device did not seem to have any idea of artistic discipline, let alone artistic decisions. On the contrary, it appeared to divert creative intentions and steal visual concepts. For example, when one of these photographers aimed his camera at a cathedral, he did not only capture the sight itself but also a plethora of details in need of explanation and additional information interfering with the main focus.

A Photo is a Photo is a Photo

The camera did not select or edit but rather, as William Henry Fox Talbot deplored, delineated a chimney-pot with the same impartiality as the Apollo of Belvedere. The new device was reluctant to compose and unable to call to order the collected visual elements in good Western tradition, i.e., to join them together to form an overall concept. Instead, it delivered an abundance of details whose status was more that of circumstantial evidence. The viewer, spoiled by nicely resolved visual solutions, could but struggle to decipher the puzzling record. William Henry Fox Talbot's text accompanying "A View of the Boulevards at Paris," from "The Pencil of Nature" (1843), could be taken as one example of this dilemma.

> *The view was taken from one of the upper windows of the Hotel de Douvres, situated at the corner of the Rue de la Paix. /The spectator is looking to the North-east. The time is the afternoon. […] The weather is hot and dusty, and they have just been watering the road, which has produced two broad bands of shade upon it, which unite in the foreground because, the road being partially under repair (as is seen from the two wheelbarrows, &c. &c), the watering machines have been compelled to cross to the other side. / By the roadside a row of cittadines and cabriolets are waiting, and a single carriage stands at a distance a long way to the right. / A whole forest of chimneys borders the horizon: […] (pp. 17 -18)*

When a painter positions a solitary carriage on a street corner, it is either a significant real element, or he has sound compositional reasons for doing so. According to the classical pictorial solutions, "a whole forest of chimneys" would be a few chimneys too many. Carriage tracks on roads are featured in paintings with intent and are not merely due to a watering machine forced by a building site to cross over to the other side of the road. The camera, however, registers without consideration for culturally conveyed criteria such as composition or significance. In its compulsion to document, it proceeds democratically, unperturbed by any selection criteria derived from a long-standing visual tradition.

As we know, however, photographers very soon learned to live with the conditions of the camera and to bring them under control. Looking through the viewfinder took over the monitoring function, and the blindly registering device began to sense its master. In the next stage of development, the photographers began to focus on details of nature in which they saw its beautiful orders prefigured, or they simply went over to editing, that is to say retouching and manipulating their products. The semi-conscious automatism of the camera would be parried by a conscious claim to authorship. The aim of the project was to harness the camera with its susceptibility to aesthetic parapraxes for the purpose of conscious image production and, particularly in the subsequent period of Pictorialism, to reconcile photographic records with traditional pictorial codes.

In this process of appropriation and further development – not to say to higher development – of a medium, the protagonists of the photographic fraternity naturally enough let themselves in for a process of winning and losing, as with all comparable efforts of this kind. While they won authorship and were able to rehabilitate a spiritless registering device for the purpose of art, they lost the bulky, unwieldy, different nature of the camera that assimilates details of reality in a fascinatingly unexpected manner. By eliminating the indigestible part of this photographic digestion process, a source of wilful obstinacy and surprises was lost. The stance of fine-art photographers at the turn of the century towards the technical, chemical nature of their equipment was one of latent repression, being no longer willing to have "pictures" stolen.

The following text focuses on an attempt undertaken by the Scottish photographer James Craig Annan to consciously – that is to say, by no means naively – depict once more that which tends to disrupt and destroy beautiful images.

The Enacted Disruption of the Image

In a photogravure of J. Craig Annan first exhibited in 1904, a white horse is seen crossing the picture space. The photo entitled "Stirling Castle" is of an almost

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James Craig Annan, *Stirling Castle*
1904, Photogravure

magical strangeness. As the caption suggests, the photograph is about the castle and not the horse, which seems out of place. Its presence in this nicely composed image would appear to have "happened." It is like a stain that has made it into the picture at the last moment. Something that one might call a disruption, a contamination, a slip, has been caught up in the webs of the device, wrongfully taking up pictorial space. Something that one would want to cover up or wipe off has unjustly gotten past the censor and is now roaming through the picture. In fact, this foreign body, which cannot justify its existence within the image, restructures the entire composition, distracting the viewer's attention in such a way as to push what is an imposing castle into the background and the back of the mind. (Fig. 1)

The idea is that, with this kind of photo, J. Craig Annan succeeds in picturing something that had been a matter of failure in the early days of photography. Something unexpected appears and maintains its status as a piece of reality outside the picture's composition. The difference is that, in an early photo, a horse galloping through the picture at the very moment when the photograph was taken, would have been a kind of surprise-outcome accident, whereas J. C. Annan is, of course, miles away from any such naivety and immediacy. His approach is extremely sophisticated; the lapse is the result of a high level of receptivity and is due to a state of alert aesthetic readiness. The element disrupting the standard composition is wished for. In this connection it is interesting to read J. Craig Annan's thoughts on the creation of "A Franciscan, Venice," a photogravure of 1894. In "*The* […] *Franciscan* I had waited for fully half an hour with the whole composition arranged before the old gentleman in brown habit came along, and he is unaware to this day of the great service he did me" (Annan, 1896, p. 277). This felicitous slip in the picture does not conclude the photographic production. It is followed by what J. Craig Annan (1896) refers to as "a long-drawn-out pleasure," that is to say, the complicated process of transferring the negative on to the copperplate. In the course of this process, Annan naturally edited the photo. The size of the clouds on the right above the castle, for instance, varies in different prints. However, to him editing did not imply retouching the white horse out of the picture, which would have been a service to those contemporaries whom this nag must have annoyed intensely.

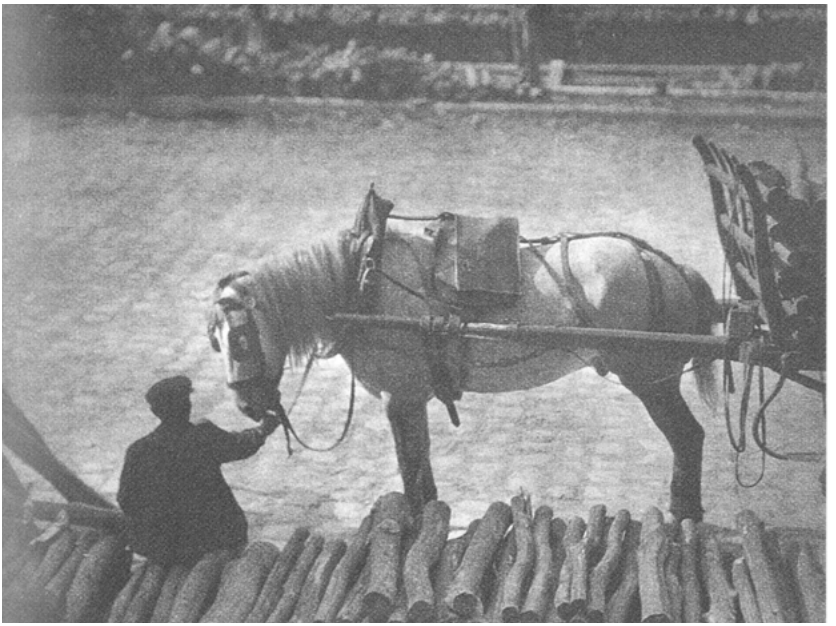
In "Stirling Castle" J. Craig Annan played off two seemingly incompatible realities against each other. Firstly there is the castle: stately, immobile, solid, built on rock, upright. The horse, in contrast, is in motion, rumbling about somewhere down below, creating a commotion, agitation, fleeing horizontally out of the picture. As a result of this left-to-right movement, it favors the horizontal orientation of the picture over the vertical. Suddenly, the horizontal lines appear more dominant than the upward pull. Not least, it serves to dismantle the monumentality of the castle. The truly interesting thing is happening at the base

of this world of stone. The castle, as mentioned above, is turned into a simple piece of scenery, providing the calm to offset the movement, and assisting at a purely temporary occurrence, a performance that could be no more ephemeral and transient. The arrangements in the photo are laden with conflict in that a castle, the odds-on favorite and prime subject in this race, was bested by a mere beast.

In this connection one is tempted to draw parallels to the structure of parapraxes developed by Sigmund Freud (2000), which he defines as the "product of mutual interference between two different intentions […], of which one may be called the disturbed intention and the other one the disturbing one" (p. 81). Parapraxes "arise from mutual interference between two intentions" (Freud, 2000, p. 80). He also emphasizes the importance of the slip and parapraxis in his "Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis" as an "instrument for producing an imaginative effect" (Freud, 2000, p. 59). Artists work with parapraxes, produce parapraxes, in order to make use of something which eludes rational control and in order to illustrate the mechanisms of the psychic apparatus. Without wishing to overuse this comparison, one might in this case speak of a "disturbed" image code, which was more or less borrowed from painting at the turn of the century. What overturned and averted this pictorial intention would be a genuinely photographic image ingredient, fallen to the photographer and nourished by the "preconscious" of the camera, which knows nothing of decorous orders. An illuminating observation by Ian Jeffrey (1993) on J. Craig Annan's position in the history of photography characterizes him as "[…] the first ironist in photography, the first to make pictures which referred to the difference between personal experience and collective or general meaning […]" (p. 104). J. Craig Annan created beautiful photos that were, in some cases, composed almost in the manner of an Old Master – his inspirations in painting are Holbein, Vandyck, and Velázquez – for which he was internationally celebrated and awarded prizes. In these photos he perfectly accommodates the aesthetic expectations of his age, while at the same time subduing control and visual potency in several others, giving himself over to the singular, insignificant and coincidental aspects which the new image technology was capable of capturing.

Removing the "Stain"

To illustrate the aforesaid and to re-emphasize the peculiarity of "Stirling Castle," I will select two photos as comparative examples: "Harlech Castle" by George Davison and "A Snapshot; Paris (1911)" by Alfred Stieglitz. "Harlech Castle," a photogravure created at roughly the same time, in 1909, and also published by Stieglitz in *Camera Work*, could be seen as the revised version of Annan's rendering



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Alfred Stieglitz, *A Snapshot; Paris (1911)*
from: *Camera Work* 41, 1913

of a castle. In this case, the "stain", the moving ingredient, the disturbing element, has been effaced. "Harlech Castle" is the picture of a castle "alone," clearly staged as the prominent subject of the image. The castle towers atop a hill and is in the light, that is to say it appears against the background of a bright band of clouds. The rest of the environs are blurred in soft focus so as to leave no doubt as to what the viewer is supposed to concentrate on. There is nothing and no one to contest the effect of this specimen of feudal architecture. In these conditions, the castle morphs into a species of prototype, *the Castle*, a Platonic idea of what makes a castle. The viewers, too, find themselves in an ideal receptive situation in that they have no other choice but to focus and maintain their attention, something which is generally a matter of mental decision and effort. Everything is designed for undivided attention. This approach could be characterized as the visual strategy of visual artists. This is how painters treat their viewers, by giving them something to see that they have "seen" before. "Stirling Castle," in contrast, features something of the polyphony of life, where things constantly tug at our receptivity, visual impressions struggle for predominance, and various sensations coexist.

George Davison's picture does not convey a truly photographic experience, but rather endeavors to arrive at a painterly result. In the case of a picture such as "Stirling Castle" a 19th century painter would in all probability have had great trouble justifying why a castle should entail a nag. The horse would in any case have to be semantically upgraded, which would in turn have consequences in terms of its depiction. A simple trot would not be the end of it. It would have to justify its link with the castle, acquiring fields of association, make itself available as a figure for symbolism and identification, or simply maintain a well-ordered formal relationship to the surrounding stalls. To present itself as it does in the photo would give rise to a complete misunderstanding in painting, and imply mimicking the incidental arrangements and amateurish compositions of life.

The second comparative example, as mentioned above, is "A Snapshot; Paris (1911)," by Alfred Stieglitz. At the time when this picture was taken, Stieglitz had already departed some way from the realm of fine-art photography which he had initially propagated so successfully. He began to take photos of street scenes, working with a hand camera. With regard to this new technology, he could draw on J. Craig Annan, who had exhibited the first pictures taken with a hand camera as early as September 1891, thus putting him at least a year, even two, ahead of Stieglitz. J. Craig Annan had stood up for this new technology in an issue of *The Amateur Photographer* from March 1896. As William Buchanan (1994) proves, Stieglitz, who wrote a related article for *The American Annual of Photography* in 1897, not only adopted Annan's form of argumentation, but also, slightly modified, Annan's own words.

Seeing Horse and Forms

Stieglitz's photo is once again about a horse. Compared with Davison's, the photo is "modern" and beholden to a completely different aesthetic. The pictured scene is an everyday one, momentary and unspectacular. The fragmentary view of the horse-drawn carriage can be seen as both a formal statement and as a nod to life and its tendency to incompleteness. The emerging "straight photography" will be all about reality and objectivity. Stieglitz's "Snapshot" and "Stirling Castle" are comparable in that they do not eliminate the particular, but rather focus great attention on the concrete and the detailed. In "Stirling Castle" we see the structure of the stone walls; in "A Snapshot; Paris (1911)" logs of wood, the cobbles, the horse's bridle are made subjects worthy of depiction. To begin with, the Stieglitz photo appears to come close to the strangeness of Annan's, but on closer inspection one discerns a dense mesh of formal references, a stringent grid of corresponding lines. The pieces of wood in the foreground correspond to those in the background. The alignment of the logs is echoed by the rows of cobblestones. The horse's body, the side of the road, the stacks of wood all form parallel lines. The horse's legs, in turn, can be seen as an analogy to the pieces of wood, and so on. The possible forms to be seen appear endless, and even if the viewer's reaction to these preconfigured correlations of the lines is only an unconscious one, he feels the well-composed nature of the picture. At some point, the connotative references to abstract painting, which Stieglitz was exploring in depth at the time, predominate. The Stieglitz photo is "new" and fascinating and revises photographic codes that had hitherto been valid, but it is also the result of sublime artistic control. J. Craig Annan, in contrast, enacts loss of control. (Fig. 2)

Among Annan's famous photos there are, however, as mentioned above, several that appear overdetermined and utterly well-composed. In his compilation of contemporary reviews of Annan, Buchanan (1994), for example, cites an anonymous article in which the reviewer observes of Annan's "Dark Mountains": "the whole picture seems full of grim purpose" (p. 58). The picture is a hair's breadth away from what Robert Demachy, in another review of Annan's work, sees as a misunderstanding in photography, that is, trying to make an allegorical statement (Buchanan, 1994, p. 78). Annan tries his hand at such a message in the photo "The Church or the World." A girl in white, roses in her hair, sitting on a pony, is flanked by two monks. The quintessence or morally intensified message is that she has arrived at a crucial point and must decide between religious vows and staying in the world of frivolity. As Buchanan (1994, p. 6) explains, the reception of this work was rather unfortunate, partly because Annan himself, in his love of printing technique variations, occasionally printed the picture mirror-reversed, thus causing the young lady to appear undecided indeed, tending now in one, now in the other direction.

The Preconscious of the Camera

As far as the technical side of photography goes, Annan is a master of his craft. His first dealings with photography were scientific, attending chemistry lectures at Andersen College in Glasgow in his early twenties. In his father Thomas Annan's workshop he learned the trade from the ground up, becoming familiar with the common printing techniques of the day, carbon and platinum printing. Father and son imported photogravure from Vienna, where Karel Klič introduced them to this technique, subsequently acquiring the rights to this process. Following his father's death, Annan and his elder brother continued to work in their father's firm, turning it into a model enterprise and flourishing company. *T. & R. Annan & Sons, Photographers and Fine Art Publishers* offered photographic services and printing of all kinds of images. Annan's decision to put the camera to an artistic use dates back to 1891. His new departure coincides with the secessionist efforts of the young photographic scene in England. As we know, the *Linked Ring* was established in May 1892.

On the one hand, Annan is a perfectionist. He is a master of his trade, controlling his means of production, his name standing for the highest technical demands on the new photography medium. He grew up surrounded by art – his father, for example, was a close friend of David Octavius Hill – and was highly aware of visual codes. On the other hand, we see the photographer who emphasizes the instinctive aspect of creating photos: "Then art is so subtle a subject […] especially if one works, as I do, more from instinct and the impression of the moment than from any pre-determined theory or principle" (Annan, 1900, p. 83- 84). He relies on the effect of the unconscious in artistic production.

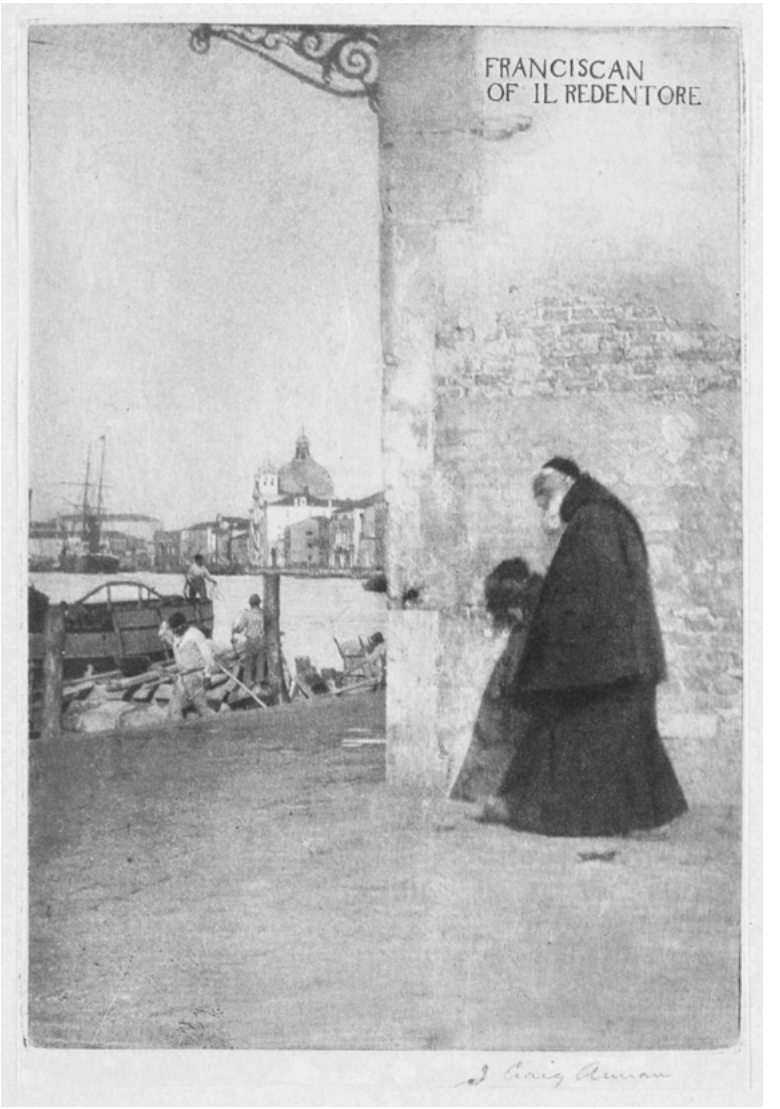
> *It may seem ridiculous to many to suggest that the unconscious sight of a beautiful curve of a chair at breakfast may enable one, later in the day, to produce a photograph of value which he otherwise would not have produced, but I am perfectly convinced that such is the fact (Annan, 1900).*

The confidence that the sight of a beautifully shaped chair at breakfast may enable one, later in the day, to produce a photograph of value is by no means rationally justifiable, but rather expresses precisely this confident stance with regard to processes that occur independently of our rational designs. Likewise, the characterization of David Octavius Hill that Annan (1905) undertook for *Camera Work* may be applied to Annan himself, and it may be taken to infer his own artistic values. This essay speaks of the importance of mustering the courage to venture into unexplored territory and to be guided by one's instincts. To Annan, the criteria

for a good photo are by no means successfully deployed aesthetic codes. Instead, he indicates the sensory pleasure that a picture must bring forth. A good photo, moreover, is one which disguises its artistic value. At a time when most ambitious photographers were endeavouring to emphasize the artistic value of their products, he observes: "You may have noticed the motto on my book plate, 'Art is to conceal art' – that applies to photography – it is not usually the most striking photograph which represents the most genuine work" (Annan, 1896, p. 157).

"A Franciscan, Venice" (Fig. 3), for example, to come back to this photograph, is almost documentary in style. Annan took the negative in Venice in 1894, publishing the hand-printed photogravure in *Camera Work* in 1904. As mentioned above, when taking this picture, Annan waited half an hour for something to appear, something which turned out to be a Franciscan monk. Walking with a slight stoop, the latter is about to turn the corner. His shadow precedes him. The photographer had been avidly awaiting him, or some similar visual surprise. Annan himself did not know who or what would appear in front of the temporary projection screen that was this old, weathered wall. In the end it was a monk who inscribed himself into the wall and into the photographic paper of his camera. Unlike the fishermen and the calm unhurried manner of their gestures, he is walking apace, seeming to shun rather than seek the camera. It was a question of photographic instinct and timing to capture him in the image. The edge of the wall seems like a dividing line in this picture. Whoever crosses this line may well vanish, invisible, lost to the camera, gone for good "around the corner." But the edge of the wall also seems like the dividing line of an ambiguous image. Once the Franciscan has gone, Venice is all there; while the monk is there, Venice is far away. This is the same interference structure manifested in "Stirling Castle." By means of this method, Annan has enabled the photographic preconscious, as it were, to register that which will devalue or indeed deconstruct what is an undisputed view in terms of its pictorial value. The dark figure of the monk puts Venice in the shade. In this case it is the singular which defines the title of the image, with Venice taking second place. In another print of the same negative, Annan added the title of the picture "The Franciscan of II Redentore" like a street name on the wall above the Franciscan, thus giving the friar something of a museum exhibit. It is he who is to be put on display, and not that which is actually worthy of exhibiting, Venice.

Another of Annan's Venice photos lends itself to closer scrutiny in this context: "A Venetian Requiem," likewise a photogravure from 1894. It depicts a street scene, a kind of Catholic procession that is possibly part of a funeral ceremony. The young men in ecclesiastical vestments are carrying large monumental candlesticks and a flag. Certain architectural details point to Venice as the scene. The players in this ceremony are in the light, in a kind of spotlight of the southern



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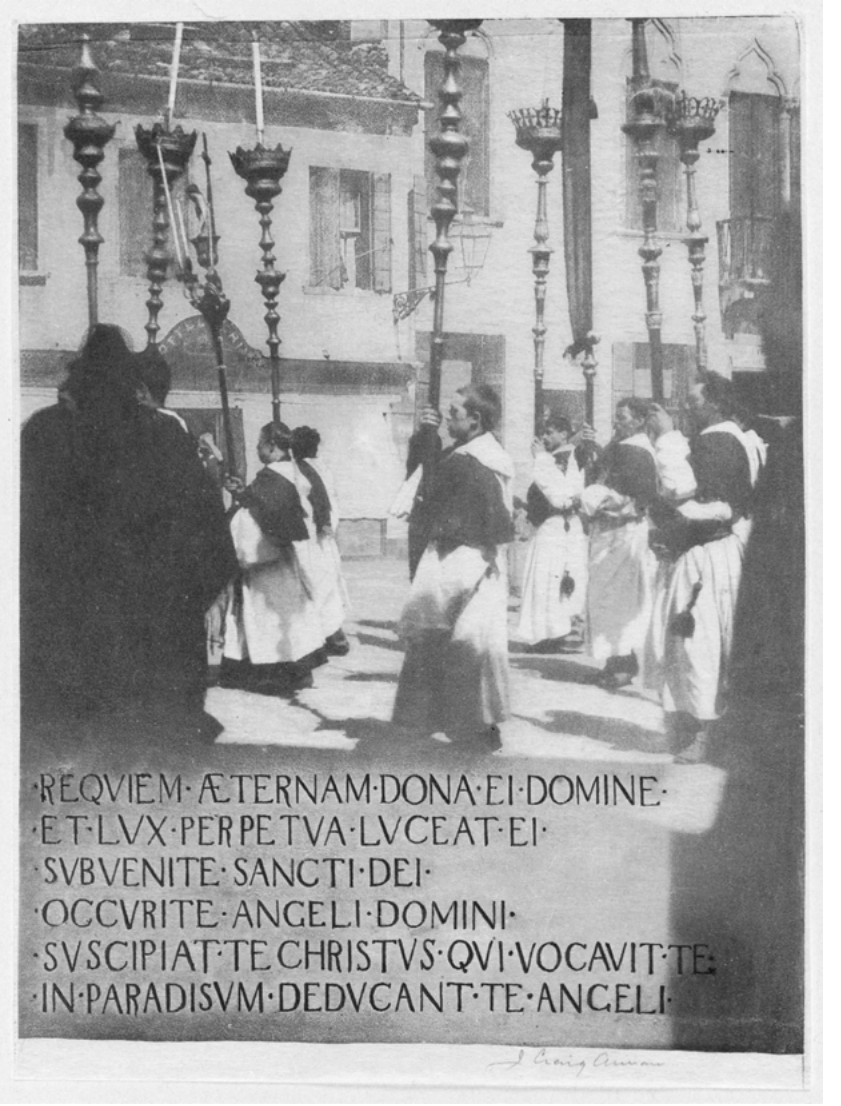
James Craig Annan, *A Franciscan, Venice*
1894, Photogravure



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James Craig Annan, *A Venetian Requiem*
1894, Photogravure

sun. The overall scene is "disturbed" by two underexposed figures in the foreground that could have been easily retouched out of the picture, but which Annan left in. While the shadows of the servants of the Church are cast according to plan and have the prescribed form, these two figures are deformed and lack any real contour. They are shadowy creatures, mere traces of human beings, incompletely detailed, but nevertheless captured on film by the grace of the camera. The camera bestowed fame on them – not for the famous Warholian fifteen minutes, but for a short photographic eternity. Genuine by virtue of being photographic "accidents," and inscribing themselves illicitly – in the course of a funeral – onto the photographic paper, they embody the epiphany of the moment. (Fig. 4)

Fritz Matthies-Masuren, a German advocate of Pictorialism, praises the two figures in the foreground as an original idea, going on to say: "A similarly fortunate solution would rarely be successful. One would not normally get beyond the 'view'" (Matthies-Masuren, 1899, p. 84). What he obviously means is that this artistic solution allowed Annan to depict something like the view. The dark, flanking figures create a kind of space, a place from where the gaze comes, thereby bringing something into the picture that, as Roland Barthes never tires of emphasising, makes up the essence of photography, that is to say, that it depicts what was once the object of a gaze that is always irrevocably past. The immaterial presence of this view stands for the heart-rending aspect of photography. The text that Annan has added to the picture, not as an illustration, but rather in the style of modern-day commercial graphic designers or layout artists, is a requiem text that creates a powerful field of associations. It is about eternal light, being temporarily in the light, as well as the underexposed.

Generally speaking, one might say: in those photos which Ian Jeffrey (1993), for example, would see as early snapshots, Annan captures singular occurrences which, compared with the visual imagery of photography in those days, are tantamount to aesthetic slips. These skilfully effected photographic "parapraxes" bespeak much of the desire for the other that appears in the photograph without my being able to want it to. One might talk about the wish to revive the surprising element in early photography that revealed what had been overlooked, challenging the viewer's position as master of the field of vision.

The Digitally Constructed Parapraxis

In 1995, Lev Manovich created his "Digital" or "Constructivist Snapshots." Manovich, born in Moscow in 1960, had studied architecture there, later going to America, where he has pursued his internationally acclaimed academic and artistic career. The catalyst for creating the constructed snapshots was a request by

Natalie Bookchin to show her some snapshots of his former life in the Soviet Union. Manovich could not fulfill this wish, however, as there had been no snapshot culture in the USSR. Hardly anyone owned a camera, nor was there any arrangement stipulating that all events of private life be constantly documented. To take photos, one went to a studio or borrowed a camera from an amateur photographer friend (Bookchin &Manovich, 1996). So because he had nothing from his younger days that Bookchin might have identified as "snapshots", Manovich decided to re-enact some with the aid of digital technologies. (Fig. 5)

This evolved into an art project on which Natalie Bookchin acted as co-author. Her cooperation was required because only she, a representative of a culture of instant photography, could know what a "snapshot" usually looks like, what its purpose was, and what its preferred motifs were. In one of these attempts – the work consists of three parts – to satisfy an American woman's expectations of a snapshot and, at the same time, to create a quasi-authentic document of his youth, Manovich constructed a scene at a Moscow subway station. This retrospective snapshot consists of a photograph of the subway architecture, clear in terms of perspective, but nevertheless tilted, and the blurred, only partially visible head of a young man blended in at the bottom left of the picture.

The question in our context is: what did Bookchin want to see when she put her request to her colleague and friend? She certainly did not want any official, authorized photos, but rather photos that she could scan for evidence of everyday situations and which would reveal something of "real" life, photos that would contain more than those who took them intended. She wanted to see blind spots, overexposed by the camera, relying on the photographic preconscious, indiscriminately receptive within its mechanical and chemical limits. That was her personal wish. The interesting thing is how Bookchin and Manovich proceeded as artists. What they constructed on the computer was the photographic mishap, the rule violation, as it were, of a successful photo. They presented the shaking, blurring and tilting, leaving the picture's structure in terms of perspective as is, like the signifier of a different order. Their digital simulation of a loss of control expresses something of the old hope that things will appear in photos if we let them.

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Natalie Bookchin & Lev Manovich, *Constructivist Snapshot*
1995 (from a Three-Part Series), Ektacolor Print