

Demonic Curiosity and Documentary Photography by Maria Mitropoulos

Hospital for Defectives

By your unnumbered charities
A miracle disclose,
Lord of the Images, whose love,
The eyelid and the rose
Takes for a language, and today
Tell to me what is said
By these men in a turnip field
And their unleavened bread.

For all things seem to figure out
The stirrings of your heart,
And two men pull the cart;
And yet between the four of them
No word is ever said
Because the yeast was not put in
Which makes the human bread.
And one man strokes his knees;
What is the meaning to be found
In such dark vowels as these?

Lord of the Images, whose love,
The eyelid and the rose
Takes for a metaphor, today,
Beneath the warder's blows,
The unleavened man did not cry out
Or turn his face away;
Through such men in a turnip field
What is it that you say?

(Thomas Blackburn)

Introduction.

Graham Clarke has defined documentary photography as being an

...index of the contentious and problematic as well as of emotional and harrowing experiences: poverty, social and political injustice, war, crime, deprivation, disaster, and suffering (cited in Friday, 2000: 356).

This definition highlights a number of problems that I seek to examine in this paper. Firstly I wish to revisit Jonathan Friday's question of 'how documentary photography taking the most profound forms of human suffering as its subject matter ...(can) achieve the status of significant art' (2000: 356).

In exploring this topic Friday deploys the concept of 'demonic curiosity' which he defines as the "morbid attraction to human suffering and what is most horrifying in human existence (Friday, 2000: 363)". He argues that such fascination comes from the dark side of romanticism and is associated with figures such as Byron. Great art according to Friday must escape morbid fascination. There is a moral point to Friday's critique here. For him demonic curiosity is fundamentally exploitative and he gives as an example the 17th and 18th century practice of visiting mental asylums to ogle at the inmates. In case

anyone is tempted to feel superior to the voyeurs of yesteryear, they might do well to contemplate the contemporary phenomenon of so-called reality television.

How then does the photographer avoid the exploitative and the immoral? Friday's solution is really a Schillerian one. He maintains that the path to the good is through the aesthetic and explicitly rejects any notion that an emphasis on the aesthetic implies an indifference to the subject of the photograph or painting. To achieve the good the photographer must draw upon a range of aesthetic properties such as 'representation, expressiveness, form, composition, beauty, symbolic meaning, style, novelty, and the sublime' (Friday, 2000: 366).

Friday's notion of demonic curiosity then provides us with a useful way to conceptualise the problems posed by the very process indeed of photographing the marginalised within our society. It also in my opinion takes us to the very heart of the dilemmas posed by the work of the celebrated and controversial photographer Diane Arbus. I would also like to deploy it in attempting a meta-reflexive positioning of my own work with an HIV positive woman.

Arbus at the margins.

What was Arbus' relationship towards her subjects and how does this effect the meaning of her pictures? Calvin Biedent in his review of Bosworth's biography and the collection of her magazine work claims that her eye was 'hostile' (Biedent, 1985:11). For Estelle Jussim commenting on Arbus 'grotesque photographic rape' of Gemaine Greer and other celebrities, Arbus was a 'brutal little savage' (cited in Clarke, 1992: 128). Writing of Richard Avedon and Arbus, Kozloff attacks them for their 'corrosive virtuosity [with which] they etched portraits of malaise and deviance' and the way in they 'both sensationalize and placate liberal guilt' (Kozloff, 1987: 203).

Arbus herself said

Freaks was a thing I photographed a lot. It was one of the first things I photographed and it had a terrific kind of excitement for me. I just used to adore them. I still do adore some of them. I don't quite mean they're my best friends but they made me feel a mixture of shame and awe. There's a quality of legend about freaks. Like a person in a fairy tale who stops you and demands that you answer a riddle. Most people go through life dreading they'll have a traumatic experience. Freaks were born with their trauma. They've already passed their test in life. They're aristocrats (Arbus, Diane, 1972: 3).

Perhaps the most sustained critique of Arbus' work and method has come from Susan Sontag. Her judgements, supported as they are by a bravura style and dazzling displays of erudition, are delivered with more than a touch of the *ex cathedra* about them. There are three aspects of Sontag's critique that I wish to concentrate on.

Firstly she makes a distinction between writing and photography. Moreover it is a distinction which privileges the writer. The latter expresses pain, often her own, while the photographer is a collector of the

pain of others. Within this schema the photographer is always the tourist-parasite visiting and colonising the sites of the pain of others.

Such a viewpoint has of course serious implications for the validity of the documentary approach, in that it would seem to rule out in an *a priori* fashion the possibility of solidarity between the photographer and those photographed. I will return to this question when discussing my own work with an HIV positive woman, but for the moment I wish to reject the notion that Arbus as a photographer could not **necessarily** have had an empathy with and a sympathy for her subjects.

I would though like to point out that in the construction of the photographer as a 'collector' rather than an 'expresser' of pain, there is something of a parallel here with Friday's argument about the dangers of 'demonic curiosity'. Friday as we have seen argues that the photograph is nearest the good that is most worked upon aesthetically, in other words when it is most expressive.

The second aspect of Sontag's critique that I wish to comment on is her placement of Arbus within an aesthetic and a political context. The aesthetic context is given by Warhol, though for Sontag, Arbus lacks Warhol's capacity for self publicity, his sentimentality and his narcissism (Sontag, : 44). Sontag reads Warhol's aesthetic through the duality of 'boringness and freakishness'.

This aesthetic is then placed within the context of the 60s. Here Sontag argues that Arbus' work is 'part of the anti-humanist message which people of good will in the 1970s are eager to be troubled by' (Sontag, 1989: 32). In a move which anticipates Kozloff's accusation that Arbus sensationalized and placated liberal guilt, Sontag analyses the political context of Arbus' work as one where affluence has produced boredom. This in turn has led to an attempt by artists like Arbus to show that 'America is the grave of the Occident' (: 48).

A much more sympathetic and frank reading of the political context of Arbus' work is given by Ariella Budick (1995). In a way that may not have been possible for Sontag, whose work was produced in the early 70s, Budick situates Arbus within the context of the Cold War. By sharp contrast with Sontag, for Budick, Arbus' photography is motivated not by the affluence and boredom of the radical chic, but rather is part of an oppositional movement to the moralistic imperatives of Cold War Ideology. Budick concludes:

Arbus's photographs must be seen in the context of a political climate where gender and politics mutually implicated each other. Conservatives held up the banner of family values, circled their wagons and vociferously fought those whom they saw as threats - Communists, 'deviants', homosexuals, feminists. By matter-of-factly presenting these un-American demons as alternatives to the generic Everyfamily in the popular press, Arbus staked a claim for another way of life that could tolerate the ambiguity of diversity. Her lens, overtly focused on sexual ambiguity, surreptitiously scanned the domestic battlefields of the Cold War as well (Budick, 1995: 126).

The third aspect of Sontag's critique that I wish to deal with is her attitude towards Arbus' subjects. This seems to be one of downright horror. Thus she dismisses Arbus' enthusiasm for her subjects as perhaps being due to an 'oversimple view of the charm and hypocrisy and discomfort of fraternizing with freaks' (Sontag, 1989: 38). Clearly Sontag is simply incapable of understanding why anyone would want to photograph or be friendly with such people. For her the problem with Arbus' subjects would appear to be that they have always been that way and therefore can have no consciousness of their pain, nor can they understand that they are 'ugly'.

As Sontag puts it, Arbus 'specialised in slow-motion private smashups, most of which had been going on since the subject's birth' (: 36). I reject, of course, this attitude towards the people Arbus photographed but, more importantly, I would like to point out that it determines Sontag's whole approach to Arbus' work. As such it severely limits the value of her critique.

As for Arbus' own attitude towards her subjects this is a matter of some controversy. However an anecdote throws an interesting light on this subject. She tells of how she attended a dance for the handicapped and was bored partly because she had no camera with her. However she started to dance and began to have a wonderful time. She felt like Jean Shrimpton a celebrity. In other words the sea of marginality with which she was surrounded made her feel super normal, like a star. However she dances with a 60 years old man and he challenges her air of superiority by saying:

"I used to worry about being like this. Not knowing more. But now" -and his eyes sort of lit up -
"now I don't worry any more" (Arbus, 1972: 7).

Arbus records that this remark was a "total knockout for her" (idem). She does not tell us how or in what way. But one can speculate that it was the self-awareness of the man that surprised her and also perhaps challenged her feelings of superiority.

What this anecdote reveals for me is that Arbus was capable of going beyond surface appearances and was also capable of learning from her encounters with those who are too often viewed simply as the occasion of horror. A subject to which I now turn through an examination of Gary MacLennan's critique of William Rothman's account of the documentary classic *Los Hurdanos*, (*Land without Bread 1932*).

Photography and Horror: the Case of *Los Hurdanos* (1932).

Luis Bunuel's *Land without Bread* contains graphic images of an impoverished and in instances mentally retarded people. MacLennan in his review of Rothman's commentary concentrates on the Nietzschean motif that Rothman expresses namely the 'terrible wisdom of Silenus', that it would be better for humanity not to have been, to be nothing and the next best thing would be to die (Nietzsche, 1993: 22).

Rothman indeed maintains that the key to understanding Bunuel's text is to realise that

. . . the existence of the Hurdanos is also our existence, that the horror that is their existence is our horror too, our horror of their existence, our horror of our own existence, our horror of everything that exists, our horror of existence itself (Rothman, 1997: 24).

MacLennan rejects Rothman's reading of the fate of the people whom Bunuel filmed. He calls instead

for an approach to the film that takes 'the labour-capital dialectic into account'. He also draws upon the Bhaskarian distinction between Power₁ and Power₂, that is between power as the capacity to do something (Power₁) and power as a set of dominatory and exploitative relations (Power₂).

This for MacLennan the concept of Power₂ would have helped Rothman avoid 'universalising the particular experience of the Hurdanos and then reducing it to some metaphysical essence' (MacLennan, 2000:139). MacLennan detects this process most clearly in Rothman's claim:

In *Land without Bread*, the land of the Hurdanos is also a literal place - a state of horror, not melancholy - known or knowable by all human beings (Rothman, 1997: 26).

One senses in MacLennan's critique of Rothman an eagerness to escape the full implications of Rothman's neo-Nietzscheanism and its attendant recognition of the horror of existence. He argues that there are moments in Bunuel's film that could enable a challenge to Rothman's thesis of the necessary horror-of-existence. For MacLennan these occur when we are shown the wealthier neighbours and of course are reminded of the affluence and power of the Catholic Church. Thus like a good Marxist, he eagerly seizes on the extraction of surplus value by the monks to conclude that there may be a way out of the hell envisioned by Bunuel.

MacLennan comes close to arguing here that all could be made well if the surplus were shared around. It is true that there is social injustice in the society depicted in *Los Hurdanos* and MacLennan is correct to point out that Rothman seems blind to this and is overly anxious to fly to the universal pole of the dialectic. But to me MacLennan seems to be the mirror opposite of Rothman in that he is above everything else keen to raise the notion of social exploitation. However the universal does exist. There is suffering beyond the social. Not all problems can be reduced to the extraction of surplus value. The first of the Buddha's Four Noble Truths is indeed true.

It is just this level of insight that is necessary for an understanding of Arbus' series *Untitled*. One could argue that these people need to be integrated into the community and that their very separation or corralling into a ghetto is indicative of the sort of exploitation or exercise of the kind of Power₂ relations that MacLennan, dare I say it, is comfortable when attacking. It is equally true that the civil liberties of the "handicapped" are often trampled on.

But the fate of the subjects in *Untitled* cannot be reduced to Power₂ and it is this truth that Arbus relentlessly catalogues. It accounts for the lasting fascination of these great photographs and why viewing them is such an uncomfortable experience.

The Photographs.

Throughout Arbus's work the most deceptively simple photographic facts embody a kind of literature: riddles, fables, Freudian slips, and the metaphoric language that belongs to dreams or nightmares. No photographs before or since have made the act of looking an act of such intelligence that to look at so-called ordinary things is to become responsible for what you see. (Richard Avedon cited in MacPherson, 1995: 119)

The pictures that I have chosen to concentrate on are in the main taken from the collection *Untitled*. These were taken in some anonymous mental institution. They are as Sontag and others have claimed the most uncomfortable pictures to view. However to understand these works one has to set them in the context of her other photographs. Let us take for example the *Mexican dwarf in his hotel room in N.Y.C. 1970* (in Arbus, 1972 np). As McPherson points out this is yet another example of Arbus' ability to mix the genres of the documentary and the studio portrait (McPherson, 1995). In a typically Arbus motif the subject looks straight at the camera. He is apparently naked but a towel covers his lap. His pose though is relaxed and he looks at us with a quizzical half smile. By his elbow is a bottle of spirits. The only overtly bizarre touch is the dapper expensive hat perched on his head. His deformity is plain to see but he refuses to meet our expectations of what his reaction to this ought to be. It is, I believe, this lack of correspondence between "normal" expectations and the attitude of the "freak" that constitutes shock and discomfort for viewers such as Sontag. The latter complains that there is no space for compassion in responding to Arbus' photographs, but this is to miss the point. The dwarf neither needs nor expects our pity and it is Arbus' great achievement to capture this very indifference of the "freaks".

Another of her photographs, which challenges the stereotype of Arbus as a collector of the pain of others, is *Female impersonators backstage at New York's Club 82 in 1962* (in Arbus, Doon & Israel, M. 1984: 154). In this case the subjects are not looking at the camera. They seem rather to be sharing some private joke. The hand of one of the young men rests tenderly on his companion. His friend holds his hands in a classically 'sissy' gesture. Both are wearing makeup. The challenge is of course to the preconceptions of masculinity that dominated the Cold War. These young men are obviously different. For some indeed they would be "freaks" or "sissies". Yet they are young, slim and in their difference very beautiful.

Within the Asylum images the stillness of photography captures for ever the gesture not right - the slightly bizarre. However within these works the mask photos are even more disturbing. As Avedon has pointed out they do make demands of the viewer. There are references here to Arbus' other work with masked celebrities and this encodes for me a double level of irony. If we look at the earlier photographs of the celebrities' masked ball and then look at *Untitled* we are forced to ask who is grotesque? Who is the "freak"? Who is normal?

Again we come with a baggage of pre-conceptions. For the normal viewer the mentally handicapped would seem to have no right to wear another mask. Do they not know that they are already masked? Yet it is the double level of grotesqueness that breaks through or rather explodes our preconceptions. Like the backward man that Arbus danced with we are shocked by their capacity for self-consciousness. It is the hint of something beyond the mask they usually wear that makes these photographs both disturbing and strangely inspirational.

If we look at the Halloween 1969 photograph of the four women and a man we can see something quite new in Arbus' work. She herself says of this picture

I seem to have discovered sunlight, late afternoon early winter sunlight...so lyric and tender and pretty...It's the first time I've encountered a subject where the multiplicity is the thing (Arbus, 1972 : 171).

Summing Up Arbus.

Sontag's notion of Arbus as a voyeur and collector of the agony of others does not I think stand up against a careful reading of her work. As Diana Hulick has definitively demonstrated Arbus was a skilled practitioner of her art and wielded a range of aesthetic techniques (Hulick, 1995: 107-16). In the terms then set by Friday she clearly was not simply a victim of demonic curiosity. Whatever the link between her work and her personal pathology, like Gericault she transformed any putative obsession into art which fearlessly contemplates the truth of suffering.

Photographing a Woman with HIV.

Each of these photographs...is a *memento mori*, even as they are also the reminders of all those unexpectedly joyful instants afforded by AIDS: the permission to be as different from the others as one has always longed to be; the courage to comfort the ill even in the cold heart of institutions (prison, hospital); the inspiration to devise new ways of expressing either faith or grief or to return to ways consecrated by tradition (Edmund White cited in Mayes & Stein, 1993: 8).

In their anthology on those who suffer from AIDS, Mayes & Stein say that it

...is difficult to photograph illness in any meaningful way: pictures of people who are ill reveal very little beyond the physical symptoms of an invisible microbe's presence (Mayes & Stein, 1993: 14).

I have found this to be true in undertaking a series of photographs with an HIV positive woman. My choice of a woman was a deliberate attempt to remind people that beyond the Euro-centric universe, the majority of AIDS sufferers are women. This choice should in no way be read as diminishing the suffering of gay men, but there were no images of women when I started this series while there was an increasing number of representations of men.

Two problems emerged early on. My subject had no visible markers of AIDS, there were none of the sores that could be read instantly as signifying 'plague'. Secondly there was the question of the dependence on captions, as a quick perusal of Mayes & Stein will testify their work is heavily dependent on the written word and being collected in an anthology which is clearly labelled. I decided to do as little captioning as possible. I decided as far as possible to confine this process to the over all title - An HIV positive woman. I was also anxious to let the photographs speak for themselves. To put this in an Heideggerian sense I wanted the *aletheia* of the pictures to emerge. I wanted the collection to be the 'clearing' in which truth would disclose itself.

By so doing I was aware that I was risking mis-readings of the images and also the danger of confounding the expectations of the viewer. However I was determined as far as possible to avoid demonic curiosity. I had no wish to endorse at any level the phenomenon of prurient curiosity, a danger by the way that Mayes & Stein do not totally avoid especially in Christopher Phillitz' series on

Aamir and Martin (Mayes & Stein, 1993: 107-113). What I wished to emphasise was above all the intrinsic humanity of my subject.

The sort of work that David Lloyd and even Mayes & Stein have done has a tendency to focus on the decay of the body or to contextualise the subject in terms of the sores that will come, or in terms of institutional imperatives such as the hospital bed etc (Lloyd, 2000). Sure the doctor in my photographs wears gloves. But I wanted to get beyond that.

In April Fool's Day Bryce Courtenay relates the harrowing experience of taking his son to the doctor. As a father he wants the doctor to respond to his son as a human being. The doctor however is excited at the prospect of photographing the sores. These are it seems remarkable. For the Doctor, perhaps, the possibility of a conference paper beckons. He has segmented the person. The sufferer has been reduced to the size of the sore. He is not at all interested in the whole, human being that he is photographing. For the doctor Bryce's son was a part (Courtenay, 1994: 643-5). The photographs he took were to illustrate a syndrome. I am not denigrating the value of medical photography here, but as a documentary photographer I wanted my pictures to illustrate a person.

It is true that like Diane Arbus often affirmed of herself, I was fearful. I too was full of expectations. I learned to put most of these aside. I was above all determined to display solidarity. I wanted to avoid the kind of processes that Curtis and Grannen have described (Rabinowitz, 1994:). They relate how Lee Walker Evans deliberately re-worked the environment of his subjects so that it would confirm to the minimalist aesthetic of modernism (Curtis & Grannen cited in Olin, 1991: 114).

I was determined to work within the spirit of solidarity as defined by Roy Bhaskar. Thus I wanted to take into account the concrete singularity of my subject. My actions were to be 'assertoric' that is 'in accordance with the agent's wants, in a potential dialectic of wants, needs, and interests' (Bhaskar, 1993: 221). There was to be nothing of the categorial imperative.

Accordingly there were moments when I had to decide to let the camera be put aside and to go up and give her a hug. Sometimes it was too hard for her and sometimes it was too hard for me.

If the viewer sits silently and watches, she will find that in these photographs there is an undercurrent of tension at work. Why is that tension there? The answer is that she was HIV positive and that sets her apart. She tries of course to be 'normal'. I try to aid and abet her in that quest. However I am a negative and she is a positive and for her at least, that will never change.

Conclusions

I have chosen to write about Diane Arbus because I feel that her work best illustrates the impulse that drives documentary photographers on. The confrontational nature of her photographs also constitutes a challenge to us to justify our practice. I hope my critique of Sontag partly at least performs that task.

I also wanted to discuss Arbus as a lead into my own work with a marginalised woman. Ultimately however as to why I photographed her and what the photographs mean to me I can only relate a story

told of the Buddha. He was approached by a woman bearing her dead baby and seeking an answer. He said he could help, but first the woman must bring a mustard seed to him from a house without suffering. She failed in that quest and then the Buddha said

My sister, thou has found,
Searching for what none finds, that bitter balm
I had to give thee. He thou lovest slept
Dead on thy bosom yesterday; today
Thou knowest the whole world weeps
With thy woe (cited in Scott & Doubleday, 1992: 12)

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