Photography and Beauty

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This essay will discuss some of the traditional ideas of beauty, contrast these views with a range of social constructionist ideas, suggest a framework for analysing the aesthetic within photography and apply this analysis to a selection of urban photographs.

Traditional ideas of beauty

The concept of beauty is usually discussed within the wider consideration of aesthetics. For example, Bosanquet (1892) defined aesthetics as the "*philosophy of the beautiful*". Early theories of beauty were developed by Greek philosophers. Plato argued that beauty exists by itself beyond space and time; that it is based on unity, regularity and simplicity and has metaphysical properties of proportion, symmetry and harmony. Pythagoras saw a connection between beauty and mathematics, especially objects that conformed to the 'golden mean' of 1.618. Shapes defined by the golden mean have traditionally been considered to be aesthetically pleasing and in western cultures thought to reflect natures balance between symmetry and asymmetry. Longinus (1991) linked the idea of beauty to that of the sublime. He though that we gain a sense of freedom by transcending the everyday: *"for, as if instinctively, our soul is uplifted by the true sublime; it takes a proud flight, and is filled with joy and vaunting, as though it had itself produced what it has heard"*. The sublime therefore is something that can only be held in the human mind through symbols and metaphors.

Kant (1987) thought of beauty in two ways: free and dependant beauty. Free beauty contains no preconceived idea of what beauty might be. Whereas dependent beauty sees beauty based upon and judged against predetermined concepts. Beauty is limited by a definite form and its power lies in its quality. Beauty is restful in that it allows for peaceful contemplation. In contrast the sublime provides satisfaction through quantity. It does not reside in nature but within us.

The sublime has two conditions: firstly, the mathematical which is "*not to be sought in the things of nature, but only in our ideas.*", and secondly the dynamic from observing the 'mighty objects' of nature. In responding to feelings of the sublime people become aware they are superior to both the nature within and external to themselves. This is not the restful feeling associated with beauty but a restlessness from the need to find a deeper level of understanding. In this system beauty functions as a way for us to approach and begin to understand the sublime.

Burke (1998) developed his concept of the sublime from the empirical ideas of John Locke. He thought that the mind cannot create anything new; it can only reorder what

already exists. Beauty exists in nature and the sublime is nature writ large. Human fears of death and terror of the unknown are also sources of the sublime.

These views evolved into what can be termed romanticism and then the 'bourgeois aesthetics' of modernism. These ideals are alive and well and in contemporary society. It is the chosen role of many galleries, museums, curators and critics to protect and promote the validity of high art and its aesthetic. An example here is Portfolio magazine which promotes contemporary photography but regularly analyses recent photographic work in these terms:

> "*One can escape from the world through art just as well as one can link oneself to it through art*" Goethe, quoted in Portfolio, no 40, December 2004 p48

> Archibald Alison claiming that the beautiful and sublime are "a*lmost constantly before us*" quoted in Portfolio, no 36 December 2002 p 64

> Wordsworth saw paradise as a "*simple product of the common day*" quoted in Portfolio, no 36 December 2002 p 64

In Beauty in Photography: essays in defence of traditional values Robert Adams writes about photography as metaphysics, recalling T S Eliots Four Quartets as an illustration of his underlying beliefs. Eliot's theme was the finite nature of life and the infinite nature of existence, and that the exploration of these universal underlying themes has been lost in the rational / logical discourse of modernity; what he called the 'dislocation of sensibility' The opening lines of the Four Quartets are;

> *Time present and time past*
> *Are both perhaps present in time future,*
> *And time future contained in time past.*
> *If all time is eternally present*
> *All time is unredeemable.*

and later..

> *In my beginning is my end. In succession*
> *Houses rise and fall, crumble, are extended,*
> *Are removed, destroyed, restored, or in their place*
>
> *Is an open field, or a factory, or a by-pass.*
>
> (Eliot 2001)

Adams wrote that "*art and its practice are of a piece with life*". He states a belief in primordial beauty and that "*art asserts that nothing is banal*" and quotes the photographer Stieglitz who proclaimed that "*beauty is the universal seen*". But Adams also contends that the modern world is disfigured with the detritus of modern life. A lot of what passes for art in the modern world is merely 'decoration'.

To Adams landscape photography equals geography, autobiography and metaphor. It provides a sense of place (but not an accurate record), a personal interpretation and something more; "*a rediscovery and revaluation of where we find ourselves*". Within this realm there is beauty, which for Adams is the purpose of art. Beauty being 'form', defined as a "*synonym for the coherence and structure underlying life*". It works for

us because it suggests order in a world of chaos. Photographs succeed if they reflect the duality of defeat and determination in the face of the adversity. This is perhaps similar to Barthes remark that photographs are essentially about desires or mourning. Successful art therefore rediscovers beauty for us, and does this best through the reconciling of diverse elements and making sense of conflicts and disorder. To be beauty, photographs also need to contain "*the complete, the full and the final Truth*" and a "*sense of possibility*".

An example of Adams work on these themes is given below. In this photograph the chaos of a building site is transformed into an aesthetic experience through composition.

Robert Adams
Untitled, Denver
1970-74

As a further development of his argument, Adams quotes Minor White who saw art reflecting reality whilst simultaneously acting as metaphor. For example White uses the sea to suggest the infinite too vast for human understanding, which places the individual in a context of transience and smallness.

Intriguingly, Adams using mine workings as an example, writes about how he can love the photographs but hate the place that is depicted in them. This leads Adams to muse on the "*certainty of evil, of the ambiguity of what photography could do with it*". He suggests the role of photography is not the journalism of social concern, but to address evil through the promotion of life's value. This (photo) journalism is important but it cannot be art, even though artistic concerns inform how journalistic photographs are made. Adams refers to the work of Louis Hine as an attempt to match journalism and the pursuit of beauty. He comments that "*the photographs urge reform, but seem to suggest that the need for it is not the most important thing to be*

said of life". Obviously there are other possible readings of these photographs and it is reasonable to assume that the young women in the photograph may have disagreed with Adams comfortable analysis.

Lewis Hine
Girl worker in Carolina cotton mill
1908

Adams argues there is no need to explore ever more strange ways of producing art. Art is found in the product not in the adoption of new processes. The only thing new in art is through the creation of new examples. In some ways this is reflects the postmodernist argument that art is simply the recycling of existing ideas and forms. Adams sums up this position by quoting Eliot from the Four Quartets:

> *".. Each venture*
>
> *Is a new beginning…*
>
> *…what there is to conquer*
>
> *By strength and submission, has already been discovered*
>
> *Once of twice, or several times, by men whom one cannot hope*
>
> *To emulate – but there is no competition –*
>
> *There is only the fight to recover what has been lost*
>
> *And found and lost again and again"*
>
> (quoted in Adams 1989: 88)

Oscar Wilde sums up this approach to beauty:

> *"Those who find ugly meanings in beautiful things are corrupt without being charming. This is a fault. Those who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated. For these there is hope. They are the elect to whom beautiful things mean only Beauty"* (1994)

In this view beauty exists out there and it is for us to see it. By seeing and experiencing beauty we become better people. The contemporary version of this bourgeois high art argument is well made by Rose (1979) who referring to recent American art claimed: "*painting is (a) transcendental, high art, a major art, and an art of universal as opposed to topical significance ... only painting is genuinely liberal, in the sense of free, an expressive human activity .. our only hope for preserving high art .... a catharsis of the imagination*". Hennessy, writing in the magazine Artforum suggested that "*the whole question of (paintings) touch is rife with spiritual associations*" (quoted in Crimp 2000: 93). In this camp photography is perhaps a poor relation to painting but strives for the same end.

Social constructionist ideas of beauty.

Crimp comments that the traditional ideas on beauty and aesthetics stand in contrast to the current social constructionist view that art is "*contingent upon the material, historical world*" (2000: 92). Walter Benjamin argued that in the modern age the power of art has been lost. He said "*that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art*" (1999). With regard to the practice of photography Benjamin comments favourably on Atget as an example of how photography has liberated the object from the aura. Benjamin sees this as a positive development enabling people to loose bourgeois values and move, in Paulo Freire's terms, from a magical to a critical consciousness which enables a more rational understanding of the world.

Bennett (1979) argues the bourgeois analysis of art and beauty is simply a reflection of the values of a dominant cultural group. Marcuse (1972) thought that bourgeois art promoted the ideals of happiness and beauty as goals of the existing social order. In claiming it could be found in the present it both legitimises this goal and acts against opposing social views. That is we do not need social change; just recognise the good that is around us. The belief in the transcendent nature of art therefore becomes a counter revolutionary discourse.

Lyotard in the Postmodern Condition argues that modernity has failed. There has been a splintering of the totality of life into individual experiences that 'desublimate meaning and deconstruct form'. That is, there is no longer any unity between cognitive, ethical and political discourses. In this context the modern aesthetic question, according to Thierry de Duve, is not "*what is beautiful*" but "what can be said to be art (and literature)" (Lyotard 2001: 71-73). This could be seen as a reductionist position that suggests the definition of art is controlled hegemonically by the art establishment (galleries, curators and benefactors) in the interest of the dominant economic base. As Eagleton argues (1991: 368) when art became commodified it lost its ideological relationship to church, court and state and became subject to the operation and direction of the market. "*This realism (of postmodernity) of the 'anything goes' is in fact that of money; in the absence of aesthetic criteria, it*

remains possible and useful to asses the value of works of art according to the profits they yield" (Lyotard 2001:76). As such art is now a signifier of capitalism and therefore does not need to be controlled by it.

Wolff (1993), although predisposed to a social constructionist analysis, takes a broader position and believes that the appreciation of art and beauty is not solely a social construct. As Raymond Williams said, the critical question is the fact that aesthetics takes many different forms in different societies "*does not mean that everything, including the most specifically artistic and most specifically aesthetic processes, has to be dissolved into some indiscriminate general social or cultural practice*" (Williams 1981 quoted in Wolff 1993: 85)

In sociological terms this debates relates to the 'specificity of art'. Wolff defines specificity in three ways. Firstly, the distinction between art and everyday activity that enables art to link individuality with the universal. Secondly, whilst art is a social product it is more than just a reflection of the dominant ideology and can be a relatively autonomous semiotic system. Thirdly, the art industry (gallery owners, curators, publishers, etc) provide a relatively independent layer of control over the production and distribution of artistic products.

Wolff argues that there are three approaches to exploring concepts of aesthetics: discourse theory, the philosophical anthropology of art and psychoanalytic theories of art. Foucault (1972) believed that the specificity of art is identical with discourse on the aesthetic. In this way good art is one that conforms to the rules and practices of aesthetic discourse. However, this does not explain why individuals find enjoyment in works of art. Wolff attempts to explore this question by referring to Timpanaro (1975). He suggests that the there are universal human elements, which are expressed through art. Whilst supporting a broad Marxist analysis Timpanaro believes that the economic base and superstructure are underpinned by human nature, for example, sexual desire and the fear of death. These human factors operate interactively with social and cultural factors. Williams calls these human factors "*permanent configurations*" (1979: 325). What is difficult to determine here is the relative strengths between these human factors and hegemonic social and cultural factors. For individuals this will vary both within and between cultures. Wolff's argument appears to be that aesthetics and the appreciation of beauty are dependent upon intrinsic human responses and cultural definitions. However, this position raises the question of what happens when cultural definitions contradict the inner human response?

Wolff suggests these dilemmas may be resolved through psychoanalytic theory. She refers to Fuller (1980) and his discussion of the Venus de Milo. Fuller argues the appeal of the Venus has nothing to do with cultural explanation about context of its creation and modes of production. Its universal appeal is based upon its ability to tap into human biological needs and instincts. Fuller claims that the Venus in "*its mutilated state, evokes in its receptive viewers the affects attaching to their most primitive fantasies about savaging the mothers body, and the consequent reparative process*" (Fuller 1979 quoted in Wolff 1993: 100). Lacan takes this argument down a different psychoanalytical route that acknowledges primary human psychological

processes can be affected by local culture. Specifically that the acquisition of language is gender specific relating to the resolution of the Oedipus complex.

From a different perspective De Sousa (2004) explores the idea of beauty being based on biological function. He identifies four types of beauty. Firstly, beauty is seen as a solution to the coordination function. Here the colour provides us with pleasure through the information it provides and the problems this helps us solve. Secondly, what De Sousa terms beauty as the 'phenomenal correlate of non-standard mechanisms' of selection; that is sexual selection. Thirdly, beauty as a reflection of the innate structure of the universe. This is based on the Kantian idea of mental functioning. This is linked to the fourth example; beauty as the pleasure taken in the exercise of the cognitive mechanisms of the brain. In this sense De Sousa argues beauty is part of play and part of the human emotional system.

From the social constructionist position Burgin rejects the bourgeois aesthetic and argues that:

> *"One thing conceptual art has done, apart from underlining the central importance of theory, is to make the photograph an important tool of practice. The consequence of such moves has been to further render the categorical distinction between art and photography ill-founded and irrelevant. The only gulf dividing the arts today separates the majority still laden with the aesthetic of Romanticism and Romantic Formalism (Modernism) from the rest."* (1982: 39)

Using the work of Diane Arbus as an example, Burgin goes onto suggest that the idea of the photographer 'capturing' the supposed unique inner essence of a person, is romantic. This is also true of similar beliefs in the 'genius' of the artist and idea of capturing 'a moment of truth'. All objects (including people) that are photographed only have meaning relative to other objects. What this meaning might be is socially constructed, ideologically based and semiotically interpreted. The idea of finding beauty in a landscape is therefore an anthropocentric perception. Burgin refers to Barthes and his book Mythologies in which he suggested that the bourgeoisie construct myths (nature, beauty and patriotism) to make their ideological position appear that of common sense or normality.

Inherent in the promotion of the dominant ideology is the deliberate absence of oppositional ideas. Photography conventionally promotes this view. Sekula (in Burgin 1982) refers to the Stieglitz produced Camera Work. This magazine promoted photography as modernist art with individual photographic images being the central object of discourse. As we have noted a landscape may conventionally be seen as a thing of beauty. Some writers take this further towards the sublime and the mystical. Minor White said:

> *"When the photographer shows us what he considers to be an Equivalent, he is showing us an expression of a feeling, but this feeling is not the feeling he had for the object that he photographed. What really happened is that he*

recognize an object or a series of forms that, when photographed, would yield an image with specific suggestive powers that can direct the viewer into a specific and known feeling, state or place within himself" (quoted in Burgin 1982: 101)

All photographs contain competing textual interpretations. A photograph may be seen as a metaphysical equivalent or be representing poverty, class relations, inequality of power, patriarchy or colonial exploitation. Essentially the content of photographs are signs and as Derrida has pointed out all signs contain the possibility of unlimited interpretation (unlimited semiosis). Benjamin wondered if the caption was the most important part of the photograph. By the use of a caption such as 'idyllic landscape' or 'exploitation of female labour' the viewer is directed towards a specific interpretation. The location of the picture: holiday magazine or political newspaper will also help determine its or the viewer.

Generally, the dominant ideology prevails as the viewer examines the image and comes to the required interpretation. This process is part of the working of hegemony (Gramsci 1971) as the viewer applies leant interpretations to the content of the photograph. To what degree the individual has flexibility in their interpretation depends on whether the structuralist or post structuralist argument is accepted. The structuralist view suggests that in modern societies individuals cannot move beyond false consciousness or naive consciousness (Adorno 1991). On the other hand post structuralists believe that multiple interpretations of objects are possible. Post structuralism allows for different ideological aesthetic constructions. Therefore, in the sense of being an autonomous entity "*the image is something that does not exist*" (Metz 1974: 35). The image exists only as a text for semiotic decoding. Like Derrida's unlimited semiosis, Barthes talks about photographic images as 'polysemic'. That is the image presents possibilities of meanings; 'a floating chain of significance'.

How far does the everyday practice of photography accord with this discussion about beauty, art and aesthetics? Bourdieu (1990) in his study of photography first published in 1965 explores how the aesthetics of photography relate to class. Peasants see photography as a frivolous activity of the wealthy that stands in opposition to the honest labour of the poor. The working class view photography alongside their understanding of painting: that of portraying an idealised version of the real. This may be landscapes, family portraits or formal pictures of significant ritual events (coming of age, weddings, etc). Sometimes these photographs represent the modern through informal arrangements. Alternatively, they can reference back to high art through formal portraits being printed onto canvas within simulated gilt frames. This view appears to be an adoption, in simplified form, of the bourgeois aesthetic. Beauty in this sense is defined as a rural landscape or portrait of a child.

Even when photography is practiced seriously by those with the disposable income to do so the "*practice is hardly ever directed towards strictly aesthetic ends*" (1990: 69). Technical consideration and the nature of the equipment (commodity fetishism?) dominate consideration of the aesthetic. The meanings of photographs are seldom discussed. Successful photography is equated with modern automated equipment. In

contrast painting is seen as artistically more demanding as it is more difficult to produce successfully. Overall, photography in this general social context reflects a normative realist based popular aesthetic related to its social function

Friday (2002) explores the ideas around aesthetics and photography and outlines a range of theoretical positions. Should art be analysed in social, cultural and economic terms? If so this requires the application of general social, cultural and economic theories. Alternatively, art can be considered as distinct phenomena. That is a creative act which requires analysis of the act itself, the products of the act and its consumption by the viewer. The latter position allows creativity to be the centre of the analysis and suggests that creativity *may* be an autonomous activity that can function independently of the social, cultural and economic context. Overall, the value of art has to be based on a social, cultural and economic discussion unless it is argued that art is an independent entity that transcends the human world.

Merely snapping a photograph and looking at, rather than seeing it, does not qualify the product as art. For the photograph to be art there has to be intentionality of the photographer to produce a work or art and of the viewer to explore its meaning from an aesthetic perspective. Furthermore, Friday suggests that the photograph has to be considered for its intrinsic value not a related concern (for example its decorative value or its commercial value): in his terms its internal not its external value. Friday links this to Kant's idea of the pleasure derived from the *'free play of the imagination'* that provides an explanation of why people seek out aesthetic experience. A question is whether this internal experience is independent of other social experience and is transcendental towards the sublime, or rooted in the experience of the viewer and interpreted through a semiotic process?

Friday explores Pierce's (1998) analysis of semiotics which sees signs as having three interlinked characteristics; symbol, index and icon. Symbol relates to culturally conventional practices and customs (red traffic light). Index refers to signs that have a direct relationship between signifiers and the signified (a lightning symbol for a thunderstorm). This can include photographs if they provide a reasonable representation of the object under consideration. Icons are signs that work pictorially and can therefore also refer to photographs. However, the icon need not be a pictorial representation of what is being signified. Friday argues that what is particular about photographs is they are both index and icon at the same time.

Photography therefore is a representational art in that it is indexical to the world. However, this does not mean that photographs depict an unmediated reality. The analogy explored by Sontag (1977) of Plato's Cave illustrates this point well. However, it is important that photographs are interpretations of the world because this makes it possible for photographs to be constructed with aesthetic qualities. We know that photographs of an object are not the object itself, but we often act as though it is, if the information in the photograph generally conforms to our preconception of what the world is like. When we discuss a photograph, we are discussing the indexical and iconic information that it contains about the world, not the photograph as isolated object. In this respect a photograph is transparent, leading us into direct consideration

of the world. This is different from painting where the surface of the picture is the subject under discussion.

In addition the artistically inclined photographer has a range of techniques available to construct the image in an aesthetic fashion. What underpins the aesthetic content of the photograph is the ability to promote 'different versions of reality', or 'expressive properties' as Friday puts it. This works for both the photographer and the viewer. So from any photograph it is possible to develop an infinite range of interpretations, although, in practice the range of interpretation is likely to be limited. Friday sums this view up by claiming *"photography is a representational art because it possesses expressive qualities that capture aesthetic attention and extend it to the representational properties over which they are spread"* (2002: 83).

Friday goes onto explores the meaning of aesthetics. He question the traditional idea that an aesthetic experience is based on emotion and feeling derived from an art object. Friday points out that it is a 'category mistake' to ascribe a psychological state to an object. This is often explained by suggesting the art product conveys the artists state of mind at the time of its creation, or that the art product arouses an emotional state in the viewer. Friday argues that the former position has no empirical basis and the latter position has no relationship to critical judgment. Emotional response to art is only useful and valid if it is a product of a critical understanding of the art object, rather than a substitute for criticality. For this to work the viewer needs to approach the photograph with an appropriate gaze that enables aesthetic and semiotic reading to take place (aesthetic gaze?)

Friday poses the question of whether is it possible, or ethically correct, to apply aesthetic criteria to photographs of murder and destruction? As Sontag (1977, 2003) points out the act of making a photograph tends to beautify the subject. Perhaps aesthetic qualities help amplify the realist images in such photographs rather than dilute them?

A possible framework for analysing the aesthetic within photography

Taking stock of the above arguments I suggest that the following positions can reasonably be suggested. Firstly, that the finding of beauty is an inherent psychological need of human beings. This need may be related to the desire of imposing some control over chaos and feeling that there is some natural order at work. However, what passes for beauty is socially constructed and is not transcendental and situated out there waiting to be discovered. Secondly, beauty in photographic terms is promoted and constructed through aesthetic expression. Thirdly, Adams suggestion that that '*a successful photograph has meaning*' but '*a great photograph has beauty*' is a valid way of critically examining photographs and photographic intent. It is not necessary to agree with his definition of beauty as transcendent to do this. Fourthly, the meaning of photographs can be read

semiotically. Fifthly, that the aesthetic and the semiotic are interlinked within a photograph.

Extrapolating from Adams and Friday it is reasonable to suggest that photographs can be read on a continuum from *semiotic / representational* meaning to *expression/formalism*. Against this another line of reading can be made of the photographers' purpose. Friday suggests this can be seen as *Idealist intent* (creation, construction and comment) versus *Realist intent* (capturing, revealing and emphasis) (Friday 202: 123).

It is theoretically possible to roughly map photographers on this field (figure 1) with the vertical axis representing photographic intent and the horizontal axis the reading of the photograph. It is unlikely that any photograph can be placed at the extremes of a continuum. To do so would imply that a photograph had no relationship to reality at all or was simply without any kind of artistic value. Friday suggests these possible examples of where various photographers may fit:

- Realist expressive = P. H. Emerson
- Idealist expressive = Alfred Steiglitz, Ansel Adams, Paul Strand, Bill Brandt
- Idealist semiotic = Robert Frank, Garry Winogrand, William Klein, Leonard Freed
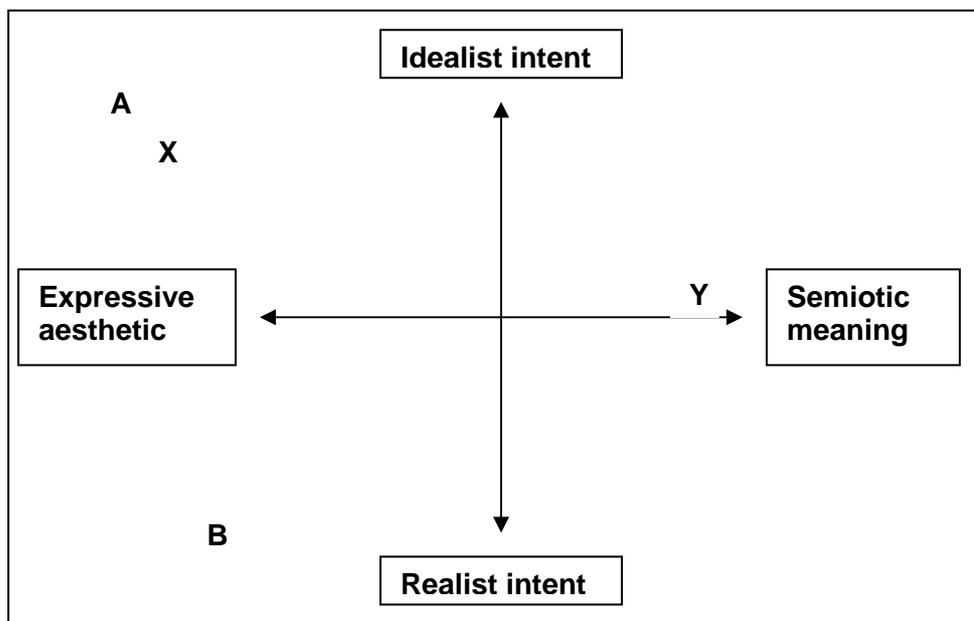- Realist semiotic = Lewis Hine, Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Don McCullin

Figure 1

In some respects this process is straightforward for mapping a photographers intent, assuming that the stated intent reflects their actual practice. For example Stieglitz pictures of clouds, Equivalents, would map around point A on the above figure, whereas Emerson photographs of the Norfolk Broads would be at point B.

However, it is often not that straightforward for the reading of a photograph. It could be argued that photographers work can move about reflecting changes of subject, style and approach. For example Cartier Bresson's work could be considered to move along the expressive/semiotic axis. Furthermore, an individual photograph can be read from various perspectives, and what the photographer claims about a photograph may only be a partial analysis. For example, Steiglitz wrote the following about his photograph of The Steerage (1907):

> *"A round straw hat, the funnel bearing left, the stairway leaning right, the white drawbridge with railings made of circular chains, white suspenders crossing on the back of a man in steerage below, round shapes of iron machinery, a mast cutting into the sky, making a triangular shape…. I saw a picture of shapes, and underlying that the feeling I had about life"* (quoted Friday 2002: 109)

The Steerage

This is clearly a statement of idealistic intent and in Steiglitz view an expressive product. An alternative semiotic reading might focus on the representation of economic and class differences. The wealthy are well dressed and the poor less so with the women wearing shawls. The poor have their washing hanging on deck and

we can reasonably suppose the wealthy have their washing done for them by poorer people working out of sight. The hierarchical nature of society is reflected by the wealthy standing physically above and either ignoring or observing with little concern the poorer people below them. The wealthy have a protected (fenced) route off the ship. The poor have no such visible exit. However, there is a ladder to the wealthy section above, but significantly there is nobody using it. So this photograph could be mapped at X for Stieglitz intention and Y for the alternative reading of it. Perhaps the best reading of the photograph is to acknowledge and combine both interpretations.

Analysis of modern urban photographs

The following examples of urban photography leaves aside (as far as this is possible) the semiotic meaning of these photographs and concentrates on the question of beauty and aesthetics. The following examples use the work of Eugene Atget, Stephen Shore and Garry Winogrand as examples along with the authors own work. The discussion presents a possible interpretation of the photographs and is not put forward as a definitive analysis.

Atget's work is generally seen as documentation in a pictorial tradition of a Paris that was in the process of change. In the photograph Au Tambour, Atget has recorded the details of the frontage. We see it almost face on, with marble base, iron bars across the windows, a drum above the door and a notice board. All this is very descriptive and a nice design. We also see the reflection of trees and sky in the windows that suggest not only a geographical context of the shop but also a link back to nature and the pre urban. The most interesting part of the photograph is the distorted faces and bodies in the door window. The face on the right appears too large for the body (which reputably is Atget himself) and looks at the building (and us) in a dislocated almost ghostly fashion. In the centre is the camera on a tripod. On the left another face is peering at us. These distorted forms and human element contrast with the formal rigid design of the frontage and takes the photograph from the level of simply recording to that of aesthetic expression. This photograph contradicts the naive view that Atget simply documented Paris and provides an example of why he was included as part of a Surrealist show in New York in 1932. The aesthetic construction also increases the semiotic material and the questions this raises for an understanding of the representational meaning within the photograph.

Eugene Atget
Au Tambour, 63 quai de la Tournelle, 1908

The second Atget photograph is of a street scene including a Chaudronner (boilermaker). On one level the street is bland with plain walls broken by windows, apart from the gate opening to the Chaudronner. A workman stands by the gate looking at the camera. Another worker appears statuesque below the sign. Indeed it is hard to know if this is actually a real person. A third person appears at the end of the street. The use of human figures gives scale and suggested meaning to the buildings.

Aesthetically, the street curves away with the cobblestones making a nice graphical design complimenting the blankness of the walls. The buildings are convex shaped showing age and maybe symbolising the weight of the lives that they have contained. The sun appears to be in the top left of the picture throwing light diagonally across the photograph. The explosion of light into the top of the photograph distorts the image. Perhaps this suggests the power of light and fire that is produced by the boilermakers work.

Eugene Atget
Rue du Maure, c. 1908

Stanley Cavell suggests that:

> *"black-and-white pictures are psychologically perceived as documents of completed action. The motifs in color photographs, however, appear to be from the present, or even in a certain sense from the future. They are less burdened with the labor of memory, and are therefore easier to approach. As source material for scholarship, they are more exact, because the colors of the period concerned are reproduced. Since color photographs are one stage less abstract than black-and-white ones, they seem to us to be more concrete and to have a more direct connection with the world"* (quoted in Shore 1993).

It is debateable that the colours of the period are reproduced accurately, there being too many variables in the photographic process for this to happen (film stock, processing, aging, digital colour space, etc). But the point that the viewer interprets colour photographs differently to black and white is valid. As such it provides a different route to the photographic aesthetic.

The second example therefore is the colour work of Stephen Shore. Weski argues that the photographs suggest a 'normal' everyday record of place, but like Atget contain more than this.

Aesthetically, this is a complex photograph. The Y of the tree contrasts with the rectangular style of the buildings. Heavy shadows split the scene in two: a traffic island with stunted nature divided from urban buildings. A single figure picked out by sunlight stands motionless and staring. Splashes of yellow brighten the scene and a representation of a Conquistador signifies the El Paso walking tour as well as Spanish colonial history.

Stephen Shore
El Paso Street, El Paso, Texas, July 5, 1975

The photograph of Meeting Street has a façade of rectangular buildings painted in the colour of the foreground parking lot and the earth. Regular patterns of windows add to the view, broken slightly by the staircase to the right. Two cars provide symmetrical boundary markers for the image. Faint yellow parking lines with the signs of fluid leakage complete the foreground. Although the place is called Meeting Street, there are no people. Do meetings take place indoors, at night? Is there any human life going on here at all?

Weski refers to Barthes idea of 'studium' (Barthes 2000) and suggest that Shore *"manages to achieve the trick of balancing both forms of observation - the emotional and the rational… present the infrastructure of a society characterized by mobility*

and communication, an infrastructure that is symbolically represented in the images through the choice of motifs such as cars, streets, traffic, gas stations, movie theatres, signs, advertisements, and telegraph poles". (Quoted in Shore 1993)

Perhaps this photograph suggests that in the urban everyday we have to find beauty where we can. Maybe there is an urban aesthetic, that on the one hand represents loss from the ideals of the romanticised view of the natural landscape, but which nevertheless contains aesthetic properties for those who can see it. This is important because in the urban context this is all we have. Shore himself wrote *"although we know that the buildings, sidewalks, and sky continue beyond the edges of this urban landscape, the world of the photograph is contained within the frame. It is not a fragment of a larger world".* (Shore1998)

Stephen Shore
Meeting Street, Charleston, South Carolina, August 3, 1975

Garry Winogrand has a more dynamic style, using 35mm cameras, wide angle lenses and deliberate tilting of the camera as an aesthetic device. John Szarkowski (1988) suggested that given the subject matter of interpreting the fluidity of urban life successful photographs for Winogrand was a matter of luck with the odds shortened by experience. There is a clear documentary product here as well as a wider aesthetic consideration. In the photograph below American 'Vets' are standing around looking as if they are trying hard to ignore the man on the ground who appears to be legless (a victim of war perhaps?). This man is the only person looking at the camera and holds the viewers attention. This is increased by the space around him. Everyone else appears in the photograph to be placed like characters in a renaissance paining, although this is obviously an unposed picture. The tilting of the picture adds to the

tension. On a documentary reading this is a powerful photograph. But it is also aesthetically pleasing and this adds weight to its message.

Garry Winogrand
American Legion Convention, Dallas, Texas, 1964

The following photograph poses a range of semiotic questions. A Black man with a White woman; are they in a relationship? How was this seen in the USA in 1964? Does their obvious middle class status affect this? They are holding chimpanzees dressed in childrens clothes; why? What does this suggest about race, about children and how we view animals? The aesthetic construction again adds to the photograph: Adult + Chimp x 2. Both chimps are looking the same way and both adults are looking in an opposite direction. There is no eye contact anywhere in this picture (apart from the photographer looking at everyone and whose presence is indicated through the imposition of his shadow on the scene). The humans appear to be isolated individuals and standing apart, whereas there is a feeling of closeness portrayed by the chimps clinging to the humans.

Garry Winogrand
Central Park Zoo, New York City, 1964

The three photographs below were made in London by the author during 2004. The first photograph depicts two (businessmen) hurrying along a pedestrianised street. They are contained within a large wall. On the wall are a line of manicured trees behind which is a façade of offices. Aesthetically, this is strong image with the rectangular blocks of the wall counter pointing the lines of the steps and the long shadows on the ground. A large shadow pattern is repeated along the line of the wall. The two men are located within an artificial controlled modern industrialised environment, yet the natural forces of light and shadow predominate.

Bishopsgate, London

The second photograph is dominated by a large bronze stature of a reclining woman facing the sky. In the background is a complex office façade with steel and glass frontage reflecting other buildings. A white shirted man dwarfed by the female statue and building speaks into a mobile phone. Behind on the steps is a small figure of a real woman. Aesthetically this photograph is about curved manufactured surfaces and reflected light. Human beings are shown as insignificant in scale to the products and representations of modernism

Bishopsgate, London

The final photograph is dominated by three gas masks. This represents artefacts of war as a casual cultural style product. Three men are looking directly at the stall. The busyness of the street market is portrayed in the background. The gas masks could be seen as alien creatures peering down at strange human behaviour. The circular eyepieces echo the three men in the foreground.

Portobello Road, London.

Conclusion

In my view there is no such thing as 'pure beauty' as this requires us to accept its existence as an independent entity outside of human consciousness. However, human beings have a need for beauty as a social construct. Photography, including urban photography, is essentially concerned with a transparent interpretation of the world. Success in this endeavour depends upon conveying semiotic meaning through the photographic product. To do this effectively aesthetic considerations have to be applied. The aesthetic contains and reflects notions of beauty and the photographic process itself tends to beautify its subject. Successful urban photography therefore contains beauty. However, this beauty is subjectively interpreted by both the photographer and the viewer.

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