Cold Eye

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Photography: A Middle-Brow Art
by Pierre Bourdieu with Luc Boltanski, Robert Castel, Jean-Claude Chamboredon and Dominique Schnapper
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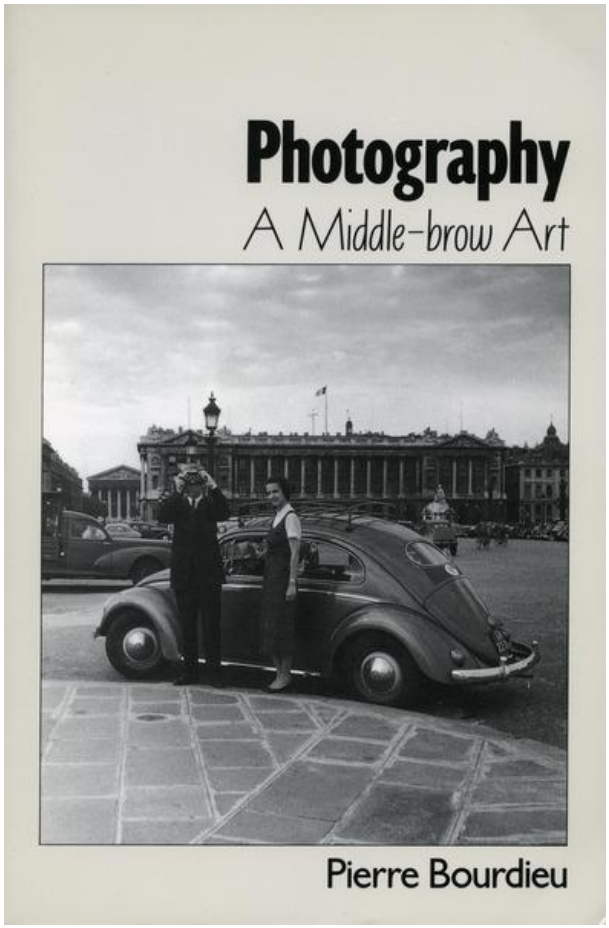

What appear to be a sequence of old snapshots in faded colour have been framed and hung on the gallery wall. They look as if they had been dug from some forgotten trunk in a family home, yet they show only backgrounds; walls, garden lawns, a deserted tea-table, an empty pram. An artist, Stephen Murphy, digitised these old snaps, replacing their figures with a plausible background sampled from the surrounding area. On close inspection, shapes slightly differing in tone trace the effaced subjects in outline; these photographs are both a glimpse of a future world depopulated by some catastrophe, and images of our passing and forgetting.

Murphy's pictures are only one example of the recent integration of family photography into fine art. Such work not only comments on the power of digitisation over photography but also on that topical matter, the crisis of the family. Many fine-art photographers now take pictures of domestic scenes, and even (most notoriously in the work of Sally Mann) of their own families. Various exhibitions have been dedicated to this work, most significantly when the trend received the ultimate official sanction at the Museum of Modern Art in New York with *Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort*.[1] On the face of it, this is a surprising development: fine-art photography has always been concerned to distinguish itself from the hordes of snappers who degrade the medium. Yet now it flirts with subsumption into the mass.

In this context, the reissue of Pierre Bourdieu's 1965 book on the 'middle-brow art' appears singularly ill-timed, for it is hard to see how such a development could be accommodated within the sociologist's rigid schemas. For Bourdieu and his collaborators, photography is determined, not directly by its intrinsic qualities but by the fact that it has become a mass social practice. In making roll film, bringing developing and printing from amateur darkrooms to mass manufacture, producing cameras which judge exposure, focus, wind on, wind back, pretend even to compose, and beep or blink admonishingly at the user's mistakes, first Kodak, and then the other giant corporations, altered photography forever. It became, above all, a family matter. The vast bulk of photographs, claims Bourdieu, are taken without much skill or conscious effort at times when families come together (and even amateurs fare little better in his confident judgment: 'In a sample of 500 amateur photographs, the pictures which showed any technical or aesthetic effort amounted to less than 10 per cent.'). Taking photographs is a demonstration of a family's integration and the resulting prints are used to the same purpose, shown or sent to acquaintances and relatives. Not much is expected from these modest photographs, only that the people in them should be recognisable. If aesthetes object to the endless succession of pictures with stiff figures placed dead centre, they are in error, because they mistake what they are looking at for art. This mundane photography continues, of course, a little less formal perhaps than the stilted examples in *Photography* where self-conscious couples stand insignificantly before the bulk of some tourist monument, but nevertheless largely unchanged. Who has not found themselves with their arm thrown awkwardly over a relative's unfamiliar shoulder to make a picture where 'subjects are shown pressed against one another' and where 'people's eyes converge towards the camera so that the whole picture points to its own absent centre'?

Bourdieu's aim in this book is ambitious; no less than to create an account of how social relations become subjectively internalised, and of how that subjectivity in turn acts on the external world. The objective and the subjective are inseparable on this view: '[...] aspirations and demands are determined, in both form and content, by objective conditions which exclude the possibility of desiring the impossible.' To study photography is to look at how various groups actually practice it, and at the relation of these groups to each other. Only in this way can we explain photography's 'instruments, its chosen objects, its rhythms, its occasions, its implicit aesthetic and even its subjects' experience of it, the meanings that they secrete in it and the psychological satisfactions that they derive from it.'

While, as an art, photography is governed by class-based attitudes which affect culture as a whole, it is more deeply marked by its status as a virtually universal social practice. So while the class battle between bourgeois, Kantian taste and lower, literal, 'barbarous' taste is familiar, the combination

[1] New York, Museum of Modern Art, *Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort* by Peter Galassi, 1991. Britain has also had a large exhibition of mainly domestic photographs, London, Barbican Art Gallery, *Who's Looking at the Family?* by Val Williams, 1994.

of views attached to photography is peculiarly illuminating. Bourdieu tells us that senior executives are very likely to grant photography the status of an art when asked about it abstractly, but are very unlikely to actually indulge in such a vulgar pursuit. Photography's equivocal status places those who seek to make it an art in a very fraught position, condemning them to an activity 'uncertain of its legitimacy, preoccupied and insecure, perpetually in search of justification.'

This work on photography is, of course, only a part of Bourdieu's long empirical and theoretical study of culture. He was attracted to it not, he later wrote, because he thought culture was of overriding importance but because the field was virtually deserted, and the few who ventured into it 'oscillated between a reductive economism and an idealism or spiritualism...'[2] Bourdieu's rebellion against the 'sacred rights of subjectivity' is still salutary given the current abandonment of cultural studies to identity mongering. The scandal of his writing is the application of statistical and empirical analysis to culture; the turning inward of the anthropological gaze to our most treasured enclaves of non-instrumental activity. There is still a shock in reading a passage cited in support of some sociological theorem, and then finding, on turning to the notes, that it was penned by Henri Cartier-Bresson.

The mass social use of photography is like a great force of gravity, restraining those content to rest on the surface of its planet as much as those who pathetically try to jump free. Photographers and viewers can be divided into strictly demarcated groups, defined structurally against one another, and determined by the overweening forces of family, class and—to a lesser extent, for Bourdieu—gender. The resulting analysis is itself a snapshot of the current state of play in the struggle for actual and cultural capital: it grasps 'a moment, a state of the game with two, three, four or six players, or whatever. It gives you a photograph of the piles of tokens of various colours that they have won in the previous rounds and which they will play in the rounds to come.'[3] And, of course, like other snapshots, it is taken for a specific purpose.

The structures which Bourdieu identified were shifting even as he wrote: he describes, for example, the changing status of children in photography reflecting their greater importance within family life, and reversing the previous hierarchy. Photography was not simply the expression of secure family values but was used in their defence. In a society momentarily dissolving, lacking continuity and a history of its own, Bourdieu asks 'Is it not natural that the photograph should, in the absence of other supports, be given the function of compiling the family heritage?'

Much has changed since 1965, especially in a country like France which had been slow to industrialise. Sometimes we are forcefully reminded that Bourdieu is writing of a different world, in which peasants were still a strong and distinct social force, and in which less than a third of the population owned a television. It was a time when photography played a central role in the mass media, reinforcing positive images of the universal 'Family of Man' which extended at least to all those who lived under capitalism.

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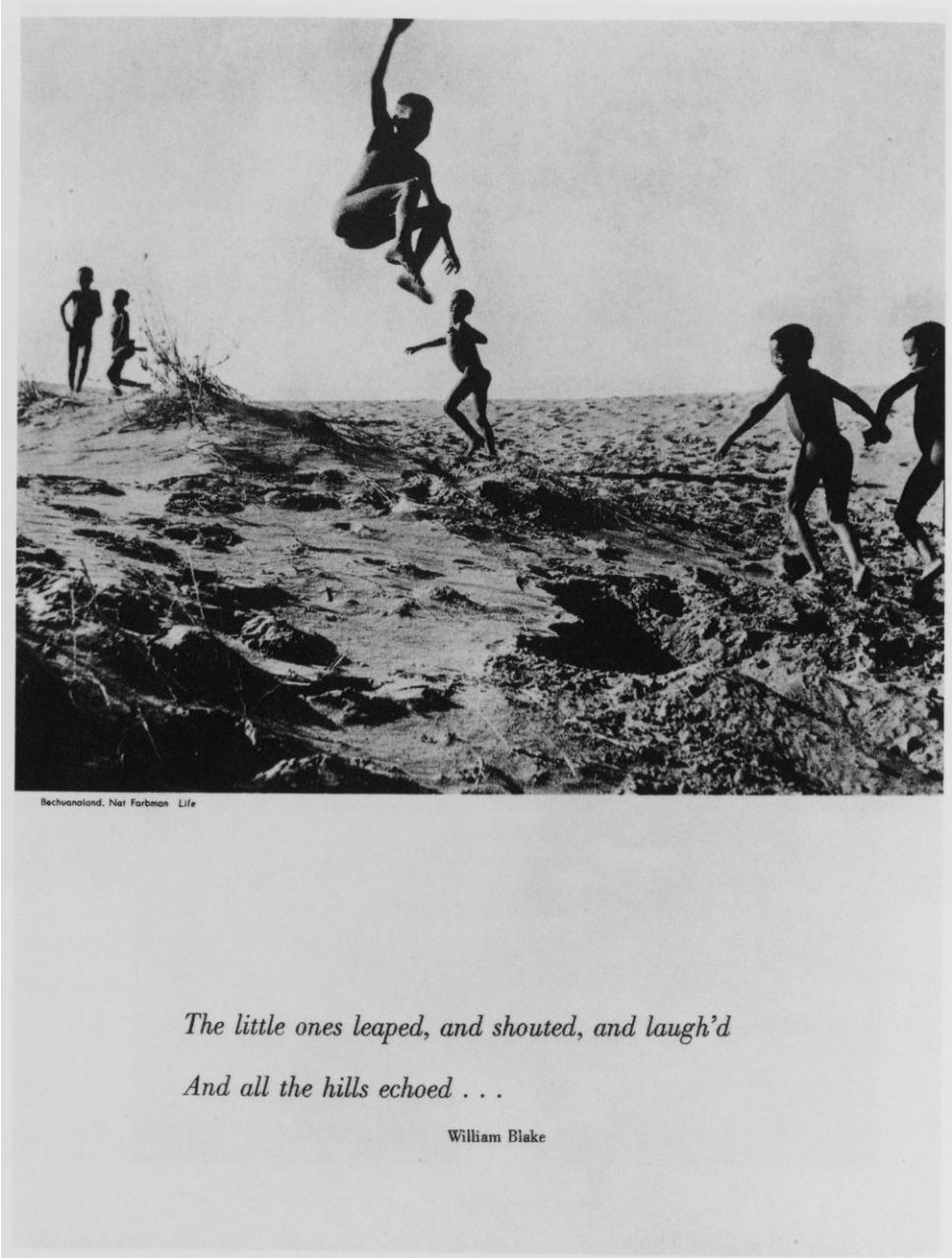
[2] Pierre Bourdieu, *Sociology in Question*, trans. Richard Nice, London, Sage Publications, 1993, p. 36.

[3] Bourdieu, *Sociology in Question*, p. 34.



Page from *The Family of Man* catalogue, 1955

It is this wider family, pictured as a unity in *Time* and *Life*, and in Steichen's 1955 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, which also lies unstated behind Bourdieu's rigid categories.[4] That exotic animal, 'man' in all its variety and natural activity (working, laughing, crying, loving, playing, giving birth and dying) was condensed into a single image at the very moment when it achieved the possibility of its own extinction. That heady, mendacious image has since faded with the liberalism which gave it birth. Traditional family ties have, of course, weakened along with the wider social consensus; conventional gender roles have been questioned on principle and undermined economically; and old

[4] New York, Museum of Modern Art, *The Family of Man*, by Edward Steichen, 1955.

class alignments have been blurred and twisted. If Bourdieu is at all correct, we should expect this to cause profound alterations in the practice of photography.

Yet these changes are not just the consequence of external social pressures. What is missing from Bourdieu's picture is the influence of the photographic industry, that strategically diversified, multi-billion dollar power, anxious, not merely to feed off pre-determined tastes and habits, but to foster and change them. In 1965 colour photography was an expensive luxury; the process by which it has become so dominant that it has made black-and-white photography an elite, minority pursuit is a matter of marketing as much as technological development. Currently the industry is pushing a new film standard, APS, designed to replace 35mm. It has certain advantages, including storing digital information about each frame, and allowing the use of variously shaped pictures on the same roll, though it is unclear that photographers want such a thing. What this cartridge-based film will do, and this is the main impetus behind it, is to remove the small difficulty people have loading 35mm, which costs the industry so much in film developed but unexposed. The social structures which sway photographic activity have long since been analysed and acted upon by sociologists in the service of business, targeting certain cameras at, say, young single women—who are far from being Bourdieu's ideal camera users.

Fine art photography provides an indication of the fundamental changes to the broader practice of photography, whether these are induced by the industry or not. Bourdieu borrows Hegel's complaint about the status of philosophy to describe photography: 'No other art or science is subjected to this last degree of scorn, to the supposition that we are masters of it without ado.' Now, when photography has become seamlessly integrated into contemporary art, we realise how much the scene has changed. Important distinctions are still made between artists' work dealing with the family

and the mass photography Bourdieu describes: alienation not closeness, death not marriage, is often the theme of such works. As Bourdieu realised, these high-art photographs pose problems of interpretation: 'the ordinary photograph, a private product for private use, has no meaning, value or charm except for a finite group of subjects, mainly those who took it, and those who are its objects. If certain public exhibitions of photographs are felt to be improper, this is because they are claiming for private objects the privilege of the art object, the right to universal attachment.' Peter Galassi, who curated the Museum of Modern Art exhibition, also notes the opacity of family photographs for those who know nothing about their subjects but dodges the issue, asking viewers to 'turn directly' to the pictures and reach their own conclusions.[5] Given this ignorance, rather than comparing knowledge of a person to a photographic portrayal (which would allow such comments as 'that's not like you'), we vainly attempt to read unknown faces for expressions of personality; psyches recede in favour of physiognomies, traumas in favour of the physical traces of suffering.

Eugène Atget. *Rue de la Montagne-Sainte-Geneviève,* June 1925.

Bourdieu was well aware of how high art could work its generalising, neutralising alchemy on photography: 'One may wonder ... whether old photographs do not owe their evocative power to the oblivion and displacement that replace the plethora of suggested meanings with one sole meaning, that

[5] New York, *Pleasures and Terrors*, pp. 11, 7.

of antiquatedness or datedness. In Atget's photographs, we no longer see streets or shops in their contingent particularity, which we cannot recognise: we perceive only one meaning, the past in itself.' And in these revamped family pictures, we often read only the failure of photographic reference. The result is that many of these photographs are no more than what an amateur would see as mistakes elevated to the realm of high art through museum display, illustrating the systematic but contradictory relativism of fine-art practice.

What has caused this new assimilation of photography's once most despised pursuit? In part, it is digitisation which threatens to throw ordinary snapping into the bin of quaint cultural activities along with embroidery or whittling. As snapshots, made sequences of binary numbers, appear on television and computer screens, and as reasonably priced digital cameras are marketed, art turns its baleful attention to chemical photography. Family photography is recuperated by high art, partly because of the frisson of its realism, at the moment when that realism is endangered.

Says one camera-club member cited in the book: 'Basically, there's a process in photography that you're not in control of. There's always something in photography that isn't perfect.' This is what digitisation can act against by eliminating accident, happy or otherwise, and making of photography just the social artifact that Bourdieu claims. Digitisation is the advertiser's dream, breaking photography's link to the real and producing a world in which all will seem eternal and beautiful. Previously, we have relied upon photography for particular kinds of knowledge, for something close to evidence: as Barthes noted, from photographs of the last century we can tell how long people wore their nails. Photography has long primped and preened its subjects, warming their flesh tones to an agreeable glow, more recently brightening colours to an unnatural intensity (Fuji's film Velvia is Kodachrome on acid). Now there are firms which will digitally remove an inconvenient ex from your prized snapshots. Yet, even in this, there is a choice about the use of this technology. No necessary link exists between digitisation and untruth: compression programs which use fractal algorithms to reduce the size of files making up digital photographs can be also employed to unpack detail in photographs which have never been compressed, and this detail may accurately represent what was left unrecorded in the original image.

Photographs taken with digital cameras may never exist as anything but digital files. They are thrown onto Web pages to be downloaded, glanced at and flushed from computer memory; grains are replaced by digits, objects which age and fade as we do are replaced by files independent of material, weightless and practically immortal. Mass photography has been a procession of nameless individuals whose images persist long after they do. The mundane image, even the most recent, becomes charged with the knowledge of their passing; Stephen Murphy's images simply reversed the relation, imagining that images might fade before their subjects.

In the process of assimilation prompted by digitisation, it is not merely photography that has changed, but contemporary art itself. If in 1965 photography lacked its own aesthetic and was insecure in its social status, this uncertainty has since extended to high art as a whole. What Jean-Claude Chamboredon wrote of photographic criticism can now stand for all contemporary art criticism: 'polysemy compensates for the absence of an established discourse and a precise vocabulary for the description of photographic creation.' This is certainly a recent development; there are many things to be said of Greenberg's modernism, still dominant when Bourdieu wrote this book, but one cannot accuse it of vacillation, relativism or insecurity.


Martin Parr, Badmington Horse Trials, 1989

In Bourdieu's terms, this change in contemporary art may not, after all, be surprising. It can be explained by the broadening of the middle class and the concomitant rise in the general level of education. This has increased the audience for contemporary art and given it a presence in the mass media, but also causes structural problems for high art which was always founded on its exclusivity. Given this, the oscillation between hype and cynicism tendered by those high priests of obfuscation, the critics, is no accident but the defensive response of an elite whose position has become insecure. As the middle classes spread and diversify, and find themselves less in outright opposition to a dormant working class, elements of it turn their jaundiced gaze (rather in the manner of Bourdieu), from the 'Other' and closer to home. The anthropological gaze has tainted high art itself; in the sneering look of Martin Parr's photographs of bourgeois interiors and social events, and in the cold vision of the German photographers of a new 'New Objectivity' who examine people remotely as one might another species. The great family of man has long passed away in this work, where people are as significant as dust motes or appear as fungal growths spotting an otherwise pristine environment. There is a certain kind of horror and confusion in looking upon these fish-eyed works which present the human subject as a sociological effect. And if we find ourselves commenting, with Bourdieu's confused respondents, 'The things they go out looking for!' 'The things they photograph!' 'Taking things like that, for heaven's sake!', we may realise that the breaking of photography's dumb veracity

also sunders it from a mass social practice which was both a document and a social display, a parade of the anonymous for which art can only weakly substitute.