

Bill Henson speech
NATIONAL GALLERY OF AUSTRALIA

Opening night Picture Paradise: Asia-Pacific photography 1840s-1940s

The world as it was - rises before our eyes in these haunting pictures. This exhibition gives us a wonderful catalogue of a vanished world as it was first caught and envisioned by photographers ranging from the eve of the Second World War, back to the beginnings of photography. It presents an encyclopaedic image of the vast, sometimes poignant history of the interplay between East and West, and between this country and the region it finds itself in, as photography has shown them. It is indeed an epic of how people see themselves and how others see them.

Some of these photographs are of lost formalities, some of them are notations of brutality. Think of the work of B.W.Kilburn - heads chopped off their bodies in his Boxer Rebellion photographs, or Beato's amazing photographs of the Forbidden City in disrepair. What could give a more heightened sense of mortality than the photograph, in its stillness, whatever its subject matter?

All photographs are necessarily about death before they are about anything else, because, like an Egyptian tomb, the photograph is also always a machine for transporting us to another time and place. And these images, like all photographs, inhabit a profoundly contradictory zone, suspended between what we feel to be a hypothetical description of the truth and what we feel is actually true. There is the dumb fact of the photograph (something is there which is being reproduced) and there is the magic that makes the past present to us.

And whatever history has revealed, we should never *presume* to see this vanished world as those who lived in it saw it. Of course, the past *is* another country and they not only do things differently there, we can only guess at the nature of that difference.

And just as we should never presume to fully grasp, what for us would be the strangeness of the world-view held by those who lived long ago and far away, so we should be *absolutely* clear that we cannot know, or fully grasp, the experience that others have, when they are alone - staring quietly and intently into this strange little mirror on the world - when they bring life's experience to bear in each encounter with a photograph. We cannot know what the long-ago subject knew and you and I cannot know - precisely - what the other sees when she looks at a picture.

The priority of individual experience when we encounter photography powerfully reinforces the value we place on each human life in ways that no other medium quite does.

Why? This comes partly I think from the fact that it *is* the most profoundly contradictory of all mediums. No other man-made art or craft has the same absolute and stupid literalness or the pull towards veracity, the evidential authority if you like, as photography. Nothing compels the imagination in the same way in its almost limitless capacity to apprehend a world that is slipping away. With the cinema there is a willing suspension of disbelief, in the great movement of a Mozart concerto we lose ourselves in abstract play, but in photography the imagination confronts a world that

no longer exists. Photography has a logic like the logic of a thunderstorm. Even with all the trickery in the world there is always an object or a scene literally *there* before the photograph, and then it is captured in an eternal present. At the same time, however, photography is a window that also tells us the world can only be reached by the imagination.

Think of those defining photographic images in history that imprint themselves indelibly on the collective imagination: the pictures of war and of the death camps - whether in Poland or Cambodia. Or those eerie images from the courts of Czarist Russia just before the Revolution: the families seated quietly, the bright faces of children staring out from amongst the palm-houses and conservatories, on the very eve of the *disappearance* of their world. How spellbinding we find these photographs. They outstare history. Of course nothing encapsulates history like the way they outstare it.

The weight of history can sometimes make it seem as if nothing more is possible. It's not hard to understand what Adorno meant when he said 'No poetry after Auschwitz.' At the same time we have to go in the face of history. We have to search for whatever wisdom or compassion can be got from such images. How are we to look at - let alone create - pictures today in a world full of children who watched the twin towers come down in New York?

Of course we have no choice. We are all part of the truth and the horror and the beauty we contemplate. And as artists - as photographers - we can only go on. And the world is something we must all meet with whatever imagination we can muster. However odd it may sound, what we inhabit is a communal dreamscape. What we possess are the fragments from some lost domain that is also a kind of community because it is made up of the shared dreams and nightmares that bind us together and show us who we are, and what we might become. It does this too by showing us where we have been: I remember, you know, seeing a doco about the death of Fellini and there was a worker, some guy who had worked (maybe as a carpenter on the sets) who went on the subway to see the great director lying in state at Cinecittà. And he said to the interviewer, as he was going along in the train, that at one point he'd softly whistled the Nino Rota tune from *8 ½*. 'And the whole carriage looked up.'

In one way we have to all be moving to the same tune, or hearing it. Everyone knows what it is like to remember childhood. Even though we go down separate paths of recollection - still childhood exists and we've all experienced it. And photography works in this area, as all art must. Anyone who was young in the 1970s remembers the 70s. It both is and isn't a different 70s that two individuals remember. Yet it might be the same photographic image - that has no direct relation to the experience of either of them - that brings the period back, with the overpowering force of memory recaptured.

There are no direct ways to talk about these things - and so my apologies for being so elliptical. What comes to my mind is a passage in Flaubert's letters, when he's been travelling in Egypt and he suddenly comes upon a giant stone clenched fist sticking out of the sand and he says, 'The sight of such grandeur in ruin makes one give up all desire to go back to Paris and get oneself talked about.' We manage to exist together - to the extent that we do manage - by imagining the experience of others.

And we destroy each other by ignoring the distances between us. Nothing kills the thing we love quite so perfectly as our assumption that we *always* know what's best, what is right for someone else, whether it's another person or another culture. It's a profound paradox that the great beauty in these pictures depends upon the formality, the recognition of difference and the acknowledgement of separation - of us from them, of photographer from subject and of one time and place from another.

I sometimes think that the most valuable way of documenting a newly discovered – a hitherto unknown – tribal culture in the jungle, would be to photograph it from the moon because only such a great a gulf might give us the humility to meet them with sufficient respect.

Indeed what we should treasure most in these photographs is not the information they yield but the mysteries they reveal. What they give us is a place from which we can question our habitual longing for a world where everyone is always aligned in the way we want.

The lesson of photography is that there are many truths, not one. Recent history shines with examples of incongruity. Was it Sir Joseph Banks on the *Endeavour*, sailing close in to the shore of Botany Bay, who was literally invisible to the Aborigines at first. Nothing like this ship had ever entered their world before and they had no eyes to see what was right in front of them.

People do sometimes only see what they want to. They also sometimes see (and make others see) more than they know. Earlier this year Edmund Capon asked me to open his exhibition of August Sander photographs on loan from the Getty. I knew that Sander loved the work of the great and mad writer-philosopher Oswald Spengler, whose *The Decline of the West* had so interested the National Socialists and shared Spengler's belief in 'types' that was to have a disturbing influence on the Nazis. But the longer you stared into Sander's pictures, the greater the contradictions became. These were *not* successful photographic descriptions of 'types' or 'categories' or 'classes' of people despite the fastidious detail; they were individuals, as different and as unfathomable as you and me.

The Weimar Republic at that time had a soaring popular culture, and aided by mechanical reproduction, as Walter Benjamin said what came with it was an ever increasing compression of information with a mounting loss of intimacy and ambiguous detail. Eventually what Germany saw was a reduction in any nuance or any subtlety of discourse in favour of a cartoon rhetoric and a black and white politics, of the jingoistic good versus evil kind. These were nothing but 'with us or against us' policies into which Sander's world was soon to disappear. So the closing words I chose for my little speech then were: 'Beware the loss of mid-tones'.

Sander thought he wanted his Spenglerian types, like the Nazis, but instead he gave us a world of subtleties and half-tones. What this exhibition gives us, with great richness and subtlety, is the ambiguity and mystery of a thousand lost worlds which are brought back to us by the power of the imagination and the capacity to wonder. There are signs and there are contradictions of signs. The greatness of art comes from the ambiguities, which is another way of saying it stops us from knowing what to

think. It redeems us from a world of moralism and opinionation and claptrap. It stops us in our tracks as we are formulating the truths we think we believe in. It stops us and it makes us wonder.