THE ROLE OF POSTMODERN PHOTOGRAPHY

IN POST-WAR CULTURE

WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO

JOEL-PETER WITKIN

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CONTENTS

SECTION ONE:

SECTION TWO:

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INTRODUCTION

This essay is going to illustrate current Postmodern theories with specific reference to the photographic work of Joel-Peter Witkin, thus demonstrating the problems inherent in the Postmodern debate.

My focus here is on the development from Modernism to Postmodernism in society, showing how the introduction of Postmodernist theories have a relevance to contemporary life, whilst also posing the question whether these theories are in effect acheiving what they set out to do, ie question old value systems with a view to constructing new ones.

In Section One of the thesis I will explain what they set out to acheive in the wake of Modernism, dealing with the changing attitudes of a Post-War generation in the face of the massive cross-cultural informational supercession and flux that we are experiencing in the increasing Industrialisation of society, and the resultant need for a new art practice to keep up with, represent and reflect this new climate.

This section will deal also with their attack on the Photographic theories of the Modernists and the liberal humanism prevalent until the mid 1900s, discussing whether or not they succeeded in de-mystifying notions of Photographic Truth.

It will also deal with their general attacks on all 'totalizing' or 'meaning-generating' systems in society, showing how they prefer instead to

'de-centralize' meaning in favour of subjectivity in opposition to a sort of omniscient elitism as they saw practiced.

It is in this area that I think they have failed, and in Section Two will argue that by adopting parody as an essential element in their methods they have in effect fallen into the same elitist trap as the Modernists by alienating any chance of an emotional response to their work.

TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF POSTMODERNISM

Firstly of course, before we can approach the Postmodern debate it is necessary to know what exactly is this thing called Postmodernism? This question is asked often enough, if not too often. I came across a long quote from Dick Hebdige which only serves to confuse the issue at this stage, but at least it brings to light its diversity and scope:

"When it becomes possible for people to describe as 'Postmodern' the decor of a room, the design of a building, the diagesis of a film, the construction of a record, or a scratch video, a television commercial, or an arts documentary, or the intertextual relationship between them, the layout of a page in a fashion magazine or critical journal... a general attenuation of feeling, the collective chagrin of a Post War generation of baby boomers confronting middle age... a process of cultural, political or existential fragmentation and/or crisis, the 'decentring' of the subject, an 'incredulity towards metanarratives,' the replacement of the unitary power axes by a plurality of power/discourse formations... the collapse of cultural hierarchies... the functioning and effects of the new miniaturized technologies, broad societal and economic shifts into a 'media,' 'consumer,' or 'multi-national' phase... - when it becomes possible to describe all these things as 'postmodern' ... then it's clear that we are in the presence of a buzzword" (Hebdige No. 16, P.17)

More concisely, Linda Hutcheon says that "what I want to call Postmodernism is fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical, and inescapably political" (Hutcheon No. 19, P.4).

This is a better point from which to start. She sees it as contradictory because it works within the very systems it is trying to question. This is because it uses, amongst other things, the technique of parody, which then necessitates working within conventions in order to subvert them. The 'newness' of Postmodernism lies paradoxically in its parody of historical codes.

The notion of History is as important to Postmodernism as it was to Modernism, the difference being that the latter saw what had gone before as something to be rejected and replaced, while the former sees it as a key to understanding the present. This is essential as I will show later on how with their methods they actually undermine their very attempts at creating new value systems.

They don't see this use of parody as being derivative: "Reproduction, pastiche and quotation instead of being forms of textual parasitism, become constitutive of textuality" (Wollen No. 43, P.34) according to the Postmodern ethic. The "realm of signs becomes not a 'second nature' but a primary 'reality'" (ibid, P.34). Craig Owens seems to think that it is derivative, saying that since the modern period was invariably "associated with human labour; aesthetic production has degenerated today into a massive deployment of the signs of artistic labour" (Owens No. 32, P.67).

Rather than seeing the relationship as parasitic Ulmer opts for a saprophytical (as

in an organism that lives off the decay of dead organisms), ie "growing among the roots of literature, feeding off the decay of tradition" (No. 37, P.49). Now, in an age marked by an ever-increasing and ever-accelerating proliferation of signs of all types, the immediate environment becomes itself increasingly dominated by signs, rather than natural objects or events (Barthes No. 5, P.17).

Charles Jencks (No. 22, P.31) defines Postmodernism as "fundamentally the eclectic mixture of any tradition with that of the immediate past: it is both the continuation of modernism and its transcendence."

Generally it could be said that Postmodernism, in its 'eclectic mixture' of traditions, questions the validity of *any* totalizing or homogenizing system, saying that the coherent, centralized entity is now defunct what with the saturation of cross-cultural images and information that is constantly in a state of flux. All it's really saying is that our culture is not the monolithic entity (white, western, male, middle-class, heterosexual) that we thought it was. Culture (with a capital C) has become cultures, and it is Postmodernism's bias to point this out by the use of various methods including collage, bricollage, allusion, allegory, simulation, pastiche, even plagiarism (sometimes) in a sort of parodic self-consciousness (that is, a parodic consciousness of the self; criticizing from within).

Such a theory definitely has a modern relevance, but the problem is that the term itself has become a cliche which has led to a dilution of its message. This is nothing new for terms like this and has led to much criticism of Postmodernism as superficial. Surrealism, for instance saw its keyword revived as 'wow': anything 'amazing' was called surreal. Likewise 'Postmodern' has become the

smart version of 'designer' or 'style' - an all-purpose tag with built-in intellectual cred. Still, it does seem to be a fairly useful word when you can apply it to all the things Hebdige lists above. The trouble is, the term has become so obscure (in a way that's more annoying than seductive) that it becomes difficult to know what Jean-Paul Gaultier and Joel-Peter Witkin have in common (besides a liking for the outrageous).

The one thing that they apparently share is that they are Postmodern. However, for the sake of this thesis, I would like to clear up the definition. In the face of its increasing use as a cliche it is important to re-define the term so that a distinction can be made between Postmodern art and all those things in society that is popularly called 'Postmodern.'

For me, Gaultier's use of religious iconography as part of the parphernalia of fashion does not in itself serve to classify him as a Postmodernist, even though it could be said that it follows many of the aspects of Postmodernism in that it has an essential eclecticism and historicism (criticised by some, Paul Barker (No. 4, P.83), as being symptomatic of the end of the century as compared to the eclectis Victorian Gothic of the 1880s and '90s). Postmodernism's characteristic modes are those of appropriation, simulation, and replication as I mentioned, 'purloinment upon purloinment' as Andy Warhol termed it. Postmodern art suggests a consideration of a work's original use and exchange values, 'thus straining the appearance of naturalism' and questioning 'ideas of competence, originality, authorship and property' so that we subject the objects of knowledge and discussion - as in any art - 'no longer to an instance of truth, but to a consideration of effects' (Barbara Kruger No. 23, P.98).

It's bias therefore seems to be a lament of sorts on the decline of the west under capitalism. As I mentioned, it achieves this through a kind of parodic self-consciousness; a contemplation of itself and society's own values. Although Gaultiers fashion (for example) could be seen to follow the premises of Postmodern art (when signalled towards the sign-conscious), it breaks from them in that it is not specifically *constructed* to serve as reflection upon itself. This is the essential difference. That it may be seen to be Postmodern is due purely to the bias in the mind of the individual.

So, although the distinction between Postmodern art and (the wrongly termed) Postmodern society is subtle, it is also very important: we can see that in effect they are quite similar; that they acheive pretty much the same ends. This distinction I feel is essential in coming to a realisation of how Postmodern art has failed; the grandiose endeavours of the Art have been acheived to equal effect by the natural course of development in society. For those of us who are already conscious of the dangers of losing our sense of placeness in the new user-friendly world, the question must arise; is this self-conscious art making us more aware of the problems or is it only adding to the saturating barrage of information?

TECHNIQUES OF POSTMODERNISM

Postmodernism is supposedly helping us to rediscover the power that resides in a little thing, in disregarded details, in aphorisms (miniaturized truths in pithy maxims), in metaphor, allusion, in images and image-streams. It has lead to the

reworking of the ancient power of the parable and the allegory, for the '"allegorical impulse" is everywhere in evidence' (Hebdige No.16, P.157). The rediscovery of historical styles that is central to Postmodernism means that even Modernist styles thereby become postmodern codes.

This leads to the ideas of pastiche and parody. Both these terms involve an imitation of a central style, but there is a fundamental difference between the two: pastiche is 'a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody's ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without the still latent feeling that there exists something *normal* compared to that which what is being imitated is rather comic' (Jameson No. 21, P.43).

Parody can also be seen in a slightly different light; Linda Hutcheon (No. 20, P.13) describes it not just as a tool of ridicule but also as a challenge to the limitations of the original meaning, parody is imitation characterized by ironic inversion which is not always at the expense of the parodied text.

M. Newman raises the question of norms, and to what extent does parody depend on the normative status of that which is being parodied and specifically its authority?

"We could, I think, distinguish between parody which maintains the originary status of the model or generic code; parody which questions the assumption of authority and origin, so that the parodic text enables their displacement or decentering; and parody which begins with the assumption of the impossibility of authority, origin and so-on" (Newman No. 31, P.42).

If you consider the extent to which art forms and practises have derived their meanings from prevailing ideologies and their styles from past ones, then I think it appears that the only type of parody that is worthwhile is the one that assumes from the beginning that pure originality is impossible. This I feel is the one to which Joel-Peter Witkin subscribes when he re-stages previous works. Thus the implied notion of the impossibility of stylistic innovation ensures that criticisms stress the failure of art and the aesthetic or what Jameson (No. 21, P.43) terms as 'the failure of the new and the imprisonment of the past.'

Pastiche is used in order 'to dramatize the second hand condition of experience' (Grundberg No. 14, P.213). Frederick Jameson has called pastiche 'speech in a dead language...blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humour' (Jameson No. 21, P. 114).Artists such as Robert Mapplethorpe, Cindy Sherman and Joel-Peter Witkin use this technique in many forms; it doesn't necessarily mean, for example, that one must collage one's sources together, as Rauschenberg did in his combined paintings and photo-collaged silk-screens. This calling up of historical stles resembles the Postmodernism of architecture, in which ornamentation is 'borrowed' from past styles without regard for its original meanings. But much of what is borrowed in photographs is outside the mediums artistic traditions; in Sherman's work the antecedent is popular visual culture, and in Witkin's it is painting and sculpture (as well as photography).

This means that artists can allude to painting, to media mythology, literature and cultural symbolism as references, and Witkin in particular is quite well versed in Art History. In short half their work is done already in that all the old 'artistic labour' of creative production has made a huge image-bank to be borrowed from

as desired. Witkin over the years has borrowed imagery from such diverse sources as Rembrandt, Max Beckman and even Batman in an attempt to examine their modern relevance and as a sort of catalyst for self-realisation.

Lovell (No. 25, P.136) (writing on Marxism and Realism) discusses how this kind of revolutionary or progressive text (written and visual) is somewhat narcissistic in that it reveals its own construction, whereas the classic realist text disguised its process of production behind a polished surface offering only a passive pre-given meaning.

This means that the progressive text (that I am calling Postmodern) is supposedly more sincere in that it isn't producing an elitism in aesthetic practice. It isn't denying its basis in past art practices, it is reflective and concerned with its processes of representation, always demanding knowledge and recollection from its viewer. (However, my view that this *doesn't* in fact exclude an elitism in aesthetic practice shall be discussed in Section Two).

That it demands recollection is quite evident in the work of Joel-Peter Witkin. For example, the photograph <u>Alternates for Muybridge, 1984</u> relates to his interest in the past, and also intends to refer to the social acceptance of such individuals as the model he chose. He recalled: "When I was introduced to this very large woman, I could see beneath the dress she was wearing that she had an overlay of fat. This reminded me of a locomotion panel in Muybridges' stop-action series in which he photographed a very heavy woman jumping"(Fig. 1) (No. 42, Page 16). The model was used with that historical connection in mind.

The historical connection comes often to his work, as can be seen in his discussing of nearly books The Green Fog, Murió Fuera De Italia [NUMBER], D. L. [NUMBER] Santa Irene's Dream of Age [NUMBER], D. L. George Cukor's For
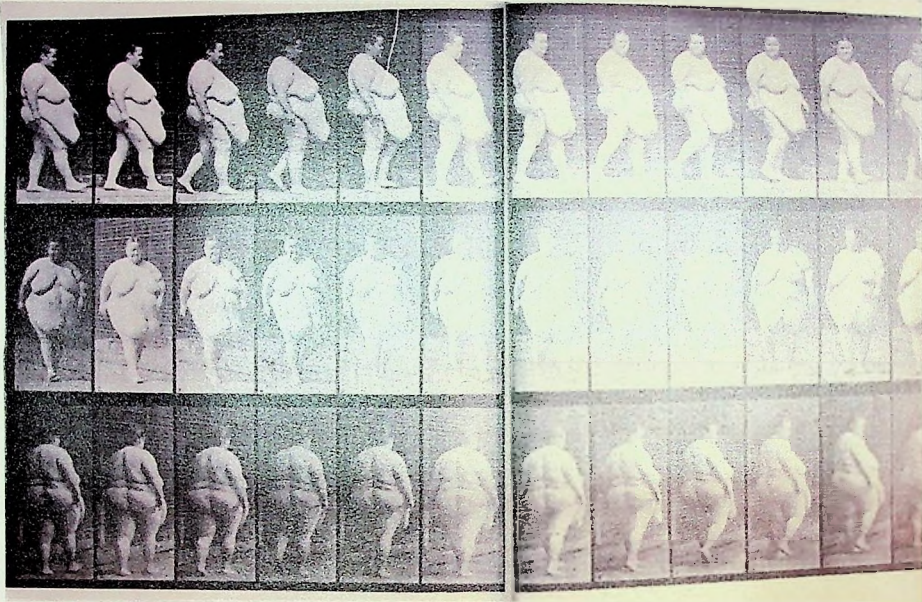

FIG. 1: MUYBRIDGE; WALKING, COMMENCING TO TURN AROUND

This historical connection recurs often in his work, as can be seen in his re-working of specific works like Goya's <u>Don Manuel Osorio De Zuniga</u> (1800)(Fig. 3), Canova's <u>Paolina Borghese as Venus Victorious</u> (1800-04)(Fig. 4), Grant Wood's <u>Portrait of Nan</u> (1933)(Fig. 7), George Catlin's <u>The Cutting Scene, Mandan O-kee-pa ceremony</u>, (1832)(Fig. 9) and Ruben's <u>The Little Fur</u> (ca. 1638)(Fig. 11).

THE DEVELOPMENT FROM MODERNISM TO POSTMODERNISM; A BRIEF BACKGROUND TO THE CHANGING SOCIAL CLIMATE

There were a number of problems inherent in Modernism, for example the aspirations of the Russian avant-garde for an art practice compatible with proletariat culture, as described by Trotsky (No. 36). Probably the biggest contradiction of the Russian avant-garde was that its proletarian politics were in complete opposition to the elitist nature of the minimalist formalism used by its artists. A common purpose of modernism was supposedly to rebel against bourgeois art practises, with a view to establishing a new world order. The attempts however of modernism were frustrated by a huge loss of public interest, the subsequent outbreak of the Second World War, as well as its abuse as a means of effective propaganda at the hands of Hitler and Stalin. Then of course Post-war capitalism introduced a changed social and economic order. Frederic Jameson (No. 21, P.54) describes the general feeling following the war; "a new kind of society began to emerge (variously described as postindustrialist society, multinational capitalism, consumer society, media society and so forth)." The effects of the war were to be seen in the increased American interest on the European continent, which alongside a number of factors, contributed to the

FIG. 2: JOEL-PETER WITKIN; <u>MANUEL OSORIO</u> ('82)

FIG. 3: FRANCISCO DE GOYA; <u>DON MANUEL OSORIO DE ZUNIGA</u> (1800)
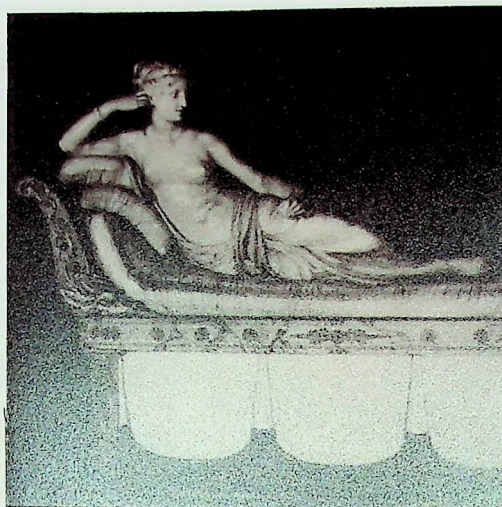
FIG. 4: CANOVA; <u>PAOLINA BORGHESE AS VENUS VICTORIOUS</u> (1800-04)

FIG. 5: JOEL-PETER WITKIN; <u>CANOVA'S VENUS</u> (1982)

FIG. 6: JOEL-PETER WITKIN; PORTRAIT OF NAN

FIG. 7: GRANT WOOD; PORTRAIT OF NAN (1933)
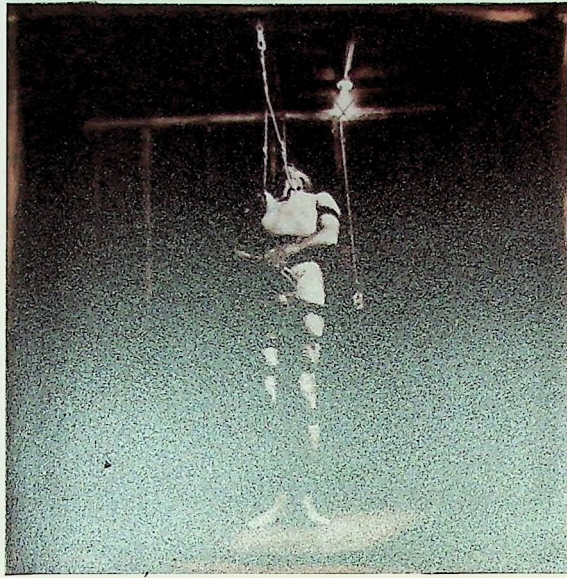
FIG. 8: JOEL-PETER WITKIN; <u>MANDAN</u> (1981)

FIG. 9: GEORGE CATLIN; <u>THE CUTTING SCENE</u> (1832)

FIG. 10: JOEL-PETER WITKIN; <u>HELENA FOURMENT</u> (1984)

FIG. 11: PETER PAUL RUBENS; <u>THE LITTLE FUR</u> (ca. 1638)

process of restructuring capitalist society. Jameson goes on to describe some features of the process:

"new types of consumption; planned obsolescence; an ever more rapid rhythm of fashion and styling changes; the penetration of advertising, television and the media generally to a hitherto unparalleled degree throughout society; the replacement of the old tension between city and country, centre and province, by the suburb and by universal standardization; the growth of the great networks of superhighways and the arrival of the automobile culture" (ibid, P.53).

The massive expansion of late capitalism also gave a lie to the doctrines of secular liberal humanism and its concern for the individual. Corporate expansion and multi-nationalisation deposed the competitive individual.

The emergence of cultural anthropology marked a changed approach to social and cultural investigation. Cross-cultural studies encouraged a greater degree of cultural understanding, and the methods of structuralism did not focus on the isolated individual, but rather on the relationship of that individual to a cultural context. Together with the 'new' science and the later phenomenon of semiology (described by the <u>Concise Oxford Dictionary</u> as the 'branch of linguistics concerned with signs and symbols'), the attribution of meaning began to concentrate on an object's relationship to another object instead of the difference between the two. Gradually, a singularity of meaning was replaced by a multiplicity of meanings, and it became clear that in this climate of change Modernism's preference for representation in terms of pure form was entirely outmoded as a means of reflecting society.

<u>AGAINST MODERNISM IN PHOTOGRAPHY: THE FALSE PROPHET</u>

Parody, irony, satire, metaphor, allusion, ambiguity and other such literary devices have been in constant use throughout the ages, as have the tendencies to indulge in the odd bit of theft and reworking of other people's ideas. These are things which have been somewhat neglected through the years of High Modernism, and have been 're-discovered' to some extent in Postmodernism. The mistake of Modernism was that it rejected historical codes with a claim to transcend them, whereas Postmodernism realized that a consideration of and a union between historical codes and (post)modern values was the way forward.

Undoubtedly, Russian avant-garde painting is a testimony to the fact that modernism approached the area of representation in terms of pure form. This universal, value-free approach was also to penetrate and influence many areas of cultural production. Modernist photography had also been preoccupied with notions of Truth and the representation of pure form, and the claim that photography in general captures objective truth has been its (unfounded) legacy and obsession as outlined earlier.

Photography has been seen by many as an instrument for Truth, the moment the shutter is released all is revealed in front of and behind the camera, as Paul Strand put it; "...the camera machine cannot evade the objects which are in front of it. No more can the photographer. he can choose these objects, arrange and exclude, before exposure, but afterwards ... Your photography is a record of your living, for anyone who really sees" (Newhall No. 30, P.113). Henri-Cartier Bresson expands this further, he believed that "through the act of living, the discovery of oneself is made concurrently with the discovery of the world around

us....A balance must be established between these two worlds - the one inside us and the one outside us. As the result of a constant reciprocal process, both these worlds come to form a single one" (ibid, P.113).

Edward Weston came to the conclusion that photography is the most pure and direct means of representation that has yet been found: conception and realization occur almost simultaneously, and the artist, undeterred by the clumsy hand, is limited then only by his or her capacity to create. To Ansel Adams, "some photographers take reality as the sculptors take wood and stone and impose upon it the dominations of their own thought and spirit. Others come before reality more tenderly, and a photograph to them is an instrument of love and revelation" (ibid). Whilst claiming on the one hand that he did not sculpt reality, an advertisement for a book of Adam's photographs (1974) read:

'The creations of man or nature never have more grandeur than in Ansel Adams photographs, and his image can seize the viewer with more force than the natural object from which it was made.' (Sontag No. 34, P.165).

It's also interesting to note that even if Adams *could* be said to be approaching his choice of subject matter in a 'realistic' fashion, you have to wonder what kind of reality he is representing when, as Robert Adams cynically puts it, he is off 'photographing in the Sierras when the worst of World War II is being fought in Europe' (Adams No. 1, P.70).

Edward Weston also made many claims for the power of the camera to capture 'Reality:'

'Only with effort can the camera be forced to lie: basically it is an honest medium: so the photographer is likely to approach nature in a spirit of inquiry, of communion, instead of with the saucy swagger of self-dubbed "artists"' (Sontag No. 34, P.164)

He said that the realism afforded by the camera exceeds the power of the human eye. He called it 'super realism,' overlooking the fact that the camera is limited to monocular vision and to an inflexible depth-of-field (since the human eye can focus on several planes of vision at once). He argued for the reduction of photographic means to create a purity of universal truth. "Photographic beauty," he announced, "is an end to be attained only through photographic means" (Holme No. 18, P.96), ie through visualizing the print completely before taking the picture, adjusting the lens to the clearest sharpest focus, contact-printing the negative and avoiding cropping or manipulation of any kind.

In this way they claimed that what they had captured was an objective viewpoint, but of course any two people taking a photograph of the same thing will do it in entirely different ways.

If the realism or super realism in Weston's photographs is then examined however, what is implied is that we understand what we see in terms of our own lives, that the object perceived in the photograph is an object known in advance to us. I suppose its true that if we are familiar with the object, his photographs could appear 'true' to that object (if it agrees with our viewpoint). But supposing we are not familiar with the object of the photograph, his images are often so close to the lens, so divorced from the context of ordinary living, that they appear to

have no objective meaning (Figs. 12|13). Often they are illusions, not facts: his shells and flowers appear to be human genitalia (and if this isn't 'imposing upon it the dominations of their own thought and spirit' - as Adams, one of Weston's contemporaries, purported to oppose - I don't know what is); the fissures in the canyons look like running water; the limbs of his models take on the solidity of stone.

These images are closer to poetic conceits than the literal renditions that he claimed. If photography begins in the world, as Weston said, his pictures are hardly as 'pure' as the early snapshots of Alfred Stieglitz. The same can be said of the whole range of carefully manicured images produced by the photographers who followed in Weston's foot-steps in the 1930s - Ansel Adams, Imogen Cunningham, Willard van Dyke and others who proudly called themselves "Group F/64" (Holme No. 18), to proclaim their adherence to the smallest aperture on the lens (a guarantee of sharp-focused detail).

Even the 'social realists' like Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange (Fig.14), were betrayed by the influence of the 'F/64' myth. They reduced and refined their means and methods, as Weston had advised, but time and again, in their lust for perfection (which in fact made them select, refine and simplify subject matter), they produced epithets, isolated faces, peeling wallpaper, rusting automobiles, not realism. Pretending to be recorders of the world, they recorded their own visions. Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Ben Shahn and Russell Lee were among the photographers recruited for the Farm Security Administration project of the late 1930s. The intention was to chronicle farmers across the country in a realistic fashion. They would approach the subject perhaps in the right fashion, but would in effect take dozens of frontal photographs until satisfied that they had
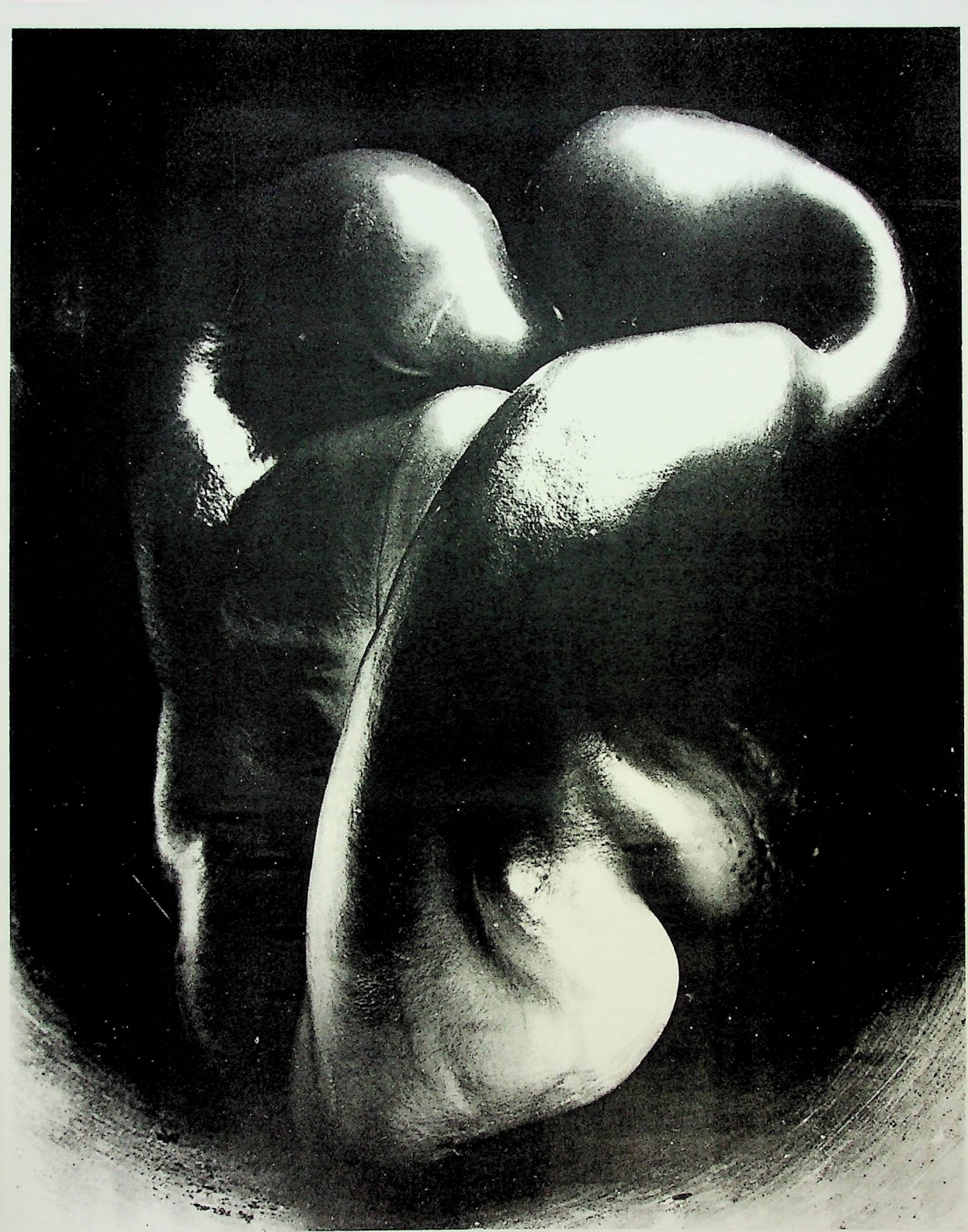
FIG. 12: EDWARD WESTON; JUNIPER - TENAYA LAKE

FIG. 13: EDWARD WESTON; THE PEPPER (1930)

FIG. 14: DOROTHEA LANGE; <u>HOPI INDIAN, NEW MEXICO</u> (ca. 1923)

gotten just the right look on film - the precise expression on the subjects face that supported their own notions about poverty, dignity, light and texture (Figs.15/16). 'In deciding how a picture should look, in preferring one exposure over another, photographers are always imposing standards on their subjects' (Sontag No. 34, P.6).

This vanity that they had actually attained a realistic representation permeated all of Photography as could be seen by Edward Steichen's 1955 exhibition called the Family of Man. The aim of this exhibition was unbelievably naive; "to prove that humanity is 'one' and that human beings, for all their flaws and villainies, are attractive creatures" (Sontag No. 34) (Fig.17). There were five hundred and three photographs of different people from different age groups, races and classes. Many of them had beautiful figures and faces. Steichen's choice of photographs for the exhibition assumed that all human beings share the same essential nature and condition, and he tried to show that all of us eat, sleep, work, live and die in the same way. However, the Family of Man seemed to forget about the differences due to history, the conflicts of culture deeply embedded in each of us.

POSTMODERNISM:
ATTACKING THE NOTIONS OF 'TRUTH' IN PHOTOGRAPHY

This is one area where I think Postmodernism's techniques do serve well as a Modernist critique. As I will attempt to show, Postmodernism's goals are noble enough and it is not without its sucesses, but as a whole I feel that it fails by alienating us from its true message in pretty much the same way as Modernism did previously.
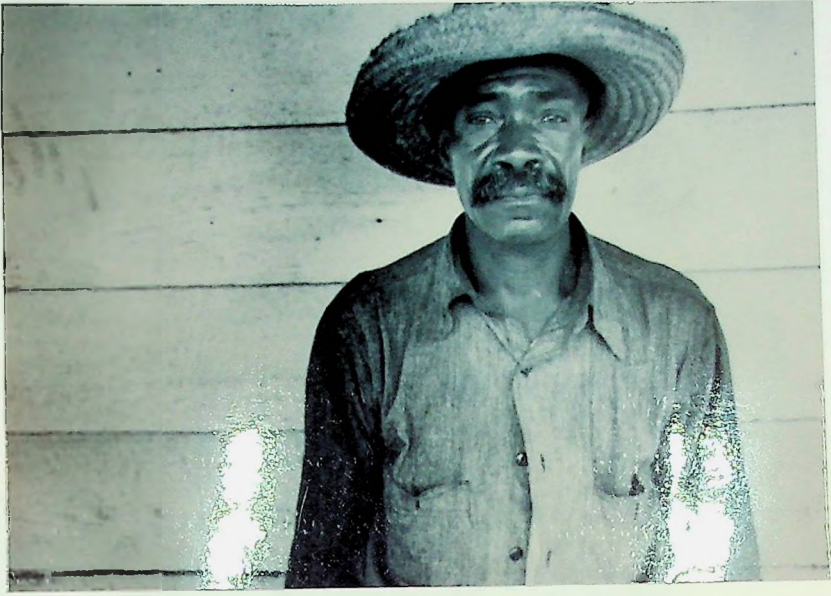
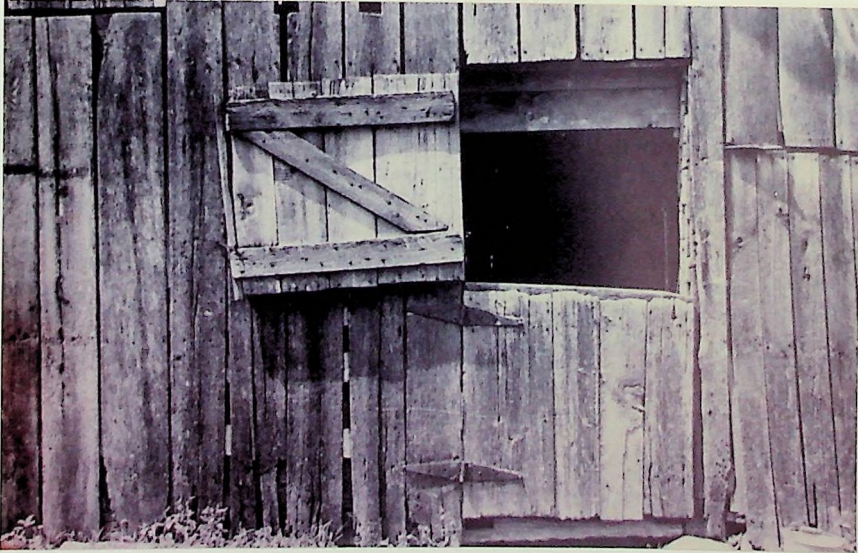FIG. 15: BEN SHAHN; <u>OZARKE SHARECROPPER</u> (ca. 1930)

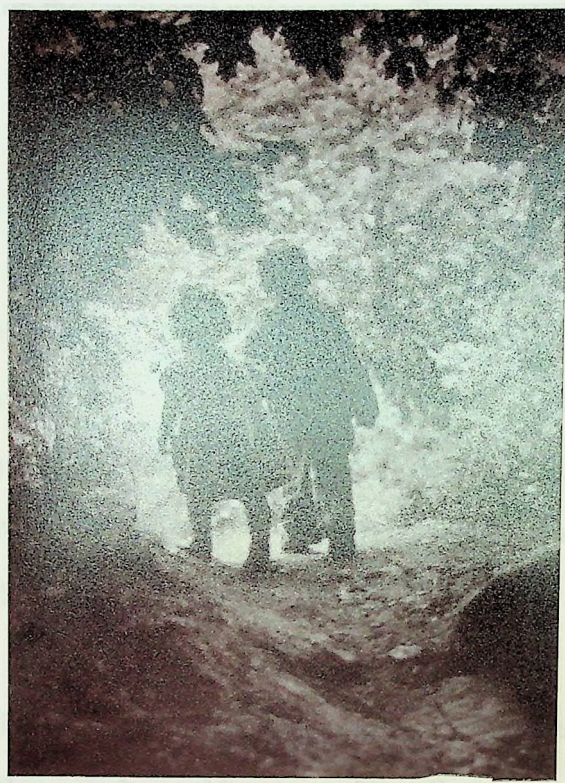FIG. 16: BEN SHAHN; <u>OLD BARN ON U.S. 40</u>

FIG 17: W. EUGENE SMITH; from <u>THE FAMILY OF MAN</u> exhibition 1955

As well as concerning itself with an attack on the traditional notions of Truth in society (as I will show in the next chapter), Postmodernism concerns itself with commenting on the traditional notions of the Truth content in Photography:

Control and judgement are elements which have disrupted the flow of truth in photography, as it is possible to construct a 'photographic reality' which only exists on the piece of paper it is printed on. The subjectivity of the photographic image, ie through framing, composition, focus etc. was not given much attention for quite some time and thus left photography the legacy of mythic 'truth.' By using a theatrical or directorial approach to the setting up or staging of a photograph Postmodern Photography comments on the impossibility of the pure approach to the taking of a photograph.

Joel-Peter Witkin has taken full advantage of this attitude towards representation to stage his photographs, and began working directorially in the late 1960s. The authority and strength of his work even at that time, which was very early in his career, was such that the imagery could not be ignored despite its refusal to conform to the then dominant 'straight' or 'purist' approach. As a result his work became one of the focal points in the debate that raged for some time over the validity of the directorial approach as an appropriate strategy for creative photography. The staged photograph could also be seen to be developing in the work of Les Krims and Duane Michals in the mid '60s. Roland Barthes said in Camera Lucida (Barthes No. 6, P.31-32) that 'it is not...by Painting that Photography touches art, but by Theatre...Photography is a kind of *Tableau Vivant*, a figuration of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the

dead.' Andreas Muller-Pohle agreed, saying that 'the currently dominant tendency is towards a staging of the picture as an answer to the aesthetic obsolescence of 'straight photography'' (No. 28A, P.13). The work of *every* photographer describes a unique, personalized world, a version of the universe shaped by that photographer's sensibility and intentions. as frederick sommer said 'Life is not the reality. We are the ones who put life into stones and pebbles' (Sontag No. 34, P.167).

The work of those photographers who function directorially shapes the universe more aggressively and is thus more undeniable; the pretence that the photograph merely mirrors the way things look gives way to the realization that the photograph for artists like Witkin encodes a way things could be seen, a way things could be made to look.

Jacques Derrida spoke of representation as "death itself" (No.13A, P.42), but Heidegger alleged that to recognize existence was to recognize the existence of representation, which was the essence of existence. That is; one's perception of reality is only one in four billion subjective interpretations, and this necessarily rules out the omniscient, objective observer (the approach that would have been favoured by the Modernist artists and photographers like Whitman). So, considering the Modernist situation of a system of representation that was wholly misguided, Craig Owens (No. 32, P.71) says ; "...the Postmodern operation is being staged not in order to transcend representation, but in order to expose that system of power that authorizes certain representations while blocking, prohibiting or invading others".

Some contemporary photographers such as the Japanese Sugimoto play around with the ideas of 'realism' in their work. His photographs on natural history (some of which were exhibited in the ROSC '89 exhibition in Dublin last year) do not propound a return to representation but rather perfect "the art of visual deception" in that his photographs can be interpreted as "images of other images" (Jameson No. 21, P.51). They are false realisms, which show large groups of stuffed animals in a studio mock-up of their natural environment. But not alone is the studio deceiving in its photo-realist appearance but the animals are in unnatural groupings; ie cats set beside birds in a safari concoction and polar bears beside penguins on an icy set.

This is an important point also in relation to the work of witkin. His work has the outward appearance of Daguerrotype images, like those of Cromers Amateur (c.1845) (Holme No. 18). This process has been termed as 'la mode retro' or retro-chic. As described by Hebdige (No. 16, P.22) it is 'the paradox of the old-fashioned modern look,' where social and moral values have long since changed along with the political mood but 'the look' remains constant. Witkin departs from his predecessors in his subject matter which is mainly concerned with portraits of physically fit as well as deformed and mutilated individuals, generally in a draped studio setting.

He has re-worked many paintings, among them a sculpture by Canova (1804-8) called Paolina Borghese as Venus Victorious. Witkin entitled his photograph Canova's Venus, and instead of Venus reclining on the chaise longue he has a male nude with his penis coming out from between the sheets. Other work of his is far more brutal and outrageous, such as his parody of a photograph of the

young Napoleon sitting on a horse, with his instructor at his side. His interpretation surrogates two grossly overweight transvestites wearing G-strings and masks in place of the two principle characters, a skeleton replaces another by-stander in the original studio set. Through his gender turn-around he means to create a critique of sexual politic through ironic inversion.

Other photographers re-hash existing works, giving them a more contemporary relevance. Sherrie Levine, for example, re-photographs images, thus re-framing the conventional and re-centering the discourse. such work has included re-photographing the self-portraits of Egon Scheile which disturbs the notion of 'artist-as-expressionist' (Foster No. 11). She has also re-arranged Walker Evans photographs of the rural poor in the U.S. as well as replaced the Classical Greek torso of Edward Weston's son Neil with a hairless, limp, washed-out torso, in a mucky grain (<u>Photograph after Edward Weston</u> 1980) (Owens No. 32).

It is as if Sugimoto, Witkin and Levine are commenting on notions of originality and photographic subjectivity. Their photographs are of situations of their own making, with the objects closely resembling reality but still on inspection one recognizes the fraud in which representations have usurped the real. In this manner Postmodernism has attacked successfully the notions of objective, Truthful Photography.

<u>POSTMODERNISM:</u>

<u>ATTACKING THE NOTIONS OF 'TRUTH' IN SOCIETY</u>

In the flux of Post-War society old value systems like the rigid views of the Church become increasingly invalid. Like the Modernist's naive attempts at creating a Universal Truth, the Church (for example) attempts to homogenize human experience. In the same way that it attacks the legacy of Truth in Photography, Postmodernism attempts to undermine the omniscient approach to society by organisations like the Church.

Indeed, in the Post-War era a general disruption in art practice and society generally of the relative certainties and the stabilities of *all* areas of High Modernism could be seen to be taking place "within the transfigured social/informational space opened up by electronic communications" (Hebdige No. 1, P.61).

In a world of instantaneous communication, multi-user systems, electronic polylogue, the artist and the critic pale even further than before into impotence and insignificance. The intellectual, the artist, the critic, Hebdige explains, can no longer claim to have privileged access to the Truth or even to knowledge, at least to the knowledge that counts. "What artist can compete with advertising when it comes to visual impact, ubiquity, effect and general exposure?" (ibid, P.61). What use is the critical interpretation of a text (by text I mean visual material as well as written) in a world where information, communication, images are instantly produced, transformed, disgarded "in a process of endless complexification, polyphony, supercession and flux?" (ibid, P.61).

In this haste of everyday exitence even to mention the relevance of Roman Catholic dogma seems out of place, and an example of how the Church's old

threats of damnation, hellfire and brimstone for sinners has become increasingly impotent can be easily shown: The classic 'Deadly' or 'Capital' sin, according to St Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) (CUA No. 9, P.213) is that which "has an exceedingly desirable end so that in his (sic) desire for it man (sic) goes on to the commission of many sins all of which are said to originate in that vice as their chief source." These vices were enumerated by St. Thomas as Pride, Covetousness, Gluttony, Lust, Sloth, Envy and Anger.

In contrast to the outmoded Catholic definition above here is a modern, twentieth century point of view that appeared in the New Statesman an Nation, July 5 1947:

"Seven deadly sins of old the Good Life tried to fix,

Freud stood surety for Lust, then there were six;

Six deadly sins danced a brisk, satanic jive,

Strachey banished Gluttony, then there were five;

Five deadly sins pursued their soul-seducing war,

Covetousness? Good for business. Then there were four;

Four deadly sins bestrode the world with devilish glee,

Envy?-Whom?-There's no-one left. Then there were three;

Three deadly sins planned what evil they could do,

Sloth? It's lack of vitamins. Then there two;

Two deadly sins enjoyed a spot of fun,

The dollar loan abolished Pride, then there was one;

One deadly sin - by Beelzebub! The last,

Anger's simply gland secretion. Sinner - danger's past!"

(Bloomfield No. 8, P.138)

The role of God has certainly diminished as compared to the role played at the

time when St. Thomas Aquinas wrote his conditions for sinning. Late Capitalism's emphasis on the rise of the individual has brought with it this diminishing of the social conscience. People these days are obviously only concerned with No.1, and combined then with the decline of the role of the Church in society, we are then left with the idea of an ideological void. America has been described as 'the grave of the Occident' (Sontag No. 34, P.43).

This is where Postmodernism stepped in. Postmodernism is born of this new climate and its bias is therefore to question any homogenizing system, and this is where I find it interesting. The idea that anyone can say 'this is how the world turns full stop' is absurd and society in general seems to be recognizing this fact. This 'revelation' seems to be punctuated by the art of the Postmodernists.

The following is an example of how society itself has through its own processes of development seen the gradual de-mystification of the taboos of Religion: I saw an advertisement in a women's magazine a while ago for a Bible. The advertisement read:

"'The Newest Testament': The last word in touch-button theology; a Franklin's lightweight, easy-access electronic Holy Bible. Sacred circles will shudder as philistines are led to the Valley of Death by the mere punch of a key. At $295 for one of two editions, Gutenberg never had it so easy. From Venture Marketing ltd., tel. 01-940 8090." (No. 35, P.107).

In that same edition of Elle (No.30A, P.114) I mentioned, I found an article that I thought was interesting because it re-enforces what I was saying about the de-mystification in modern society of the so-called sacred. It was about 'Good' and 'Evil' in Fashion. Firstly it talked of Fashion on the cat-walks falling into two

distinct camps:

'On the one hand, visions suffused in light,' whilst it said that '(f)rom the darker side of the cat-walk come the new blacks. Jean-Paul Gaultier shows mean body conscious leather and latex with the body zipped, bound, buckled, and moulded into shape. Whitened faces were framed by sharp bobs and accentuated by hollowed-out eye make-up reminiscent of the 1930's Berlin. Controlled and in control, earthbound, yes - and hellbent, for sure - Helmut Lang, Maria Cornejo and Martine Sitbon all paraded malevolent and seriously sinister style for Autumn/Winter 89/90' (No. 30A, P.114).'

Also, in the accessories department we see that a 'Heavenly season' lies ahead for jewellery lovers.

'Symbols and icons of the religious and spiritual worlds are multiplying on jewellery counters nationwide, lending lively decoration rather than celestial salvation. Crosses, rosaries, serious angels (as opposed to witty cherubs)...can be found next to evil eye pendants, serpent bracelets and sinister skull jewellery... It was Madonna who first brandished the cross as decoration. The little Catholic girl made a reverent crucifix worn over skimpy lace the funkiest street-smart accessory... Alternatively, dive into the underworld and to hell with it. As Alice Cooper and Ozzy Ozbourne make a comeback, mad, bad jewellery is tops for dramatic appeal... Bewitching and Brilliant or Absolutely Angelic, if the 1980's gave you bad karma, charm your way into the 1990's'(No. 30A, P.114).'

I thought this long quote was a good example of how the popular media can be seen to be doing the 'job' of the Postmodern artist without actually being Postmodern art per se (in that they weren't created solely to be a comment upon themselves as I explained in the Introduction).

As a Postmodern artist, Joel-Peter Witkin also chooses to try and de-mystify the Church and the notions of Sin by attempting to show their essential

inter-connectedness. According to Van Deren Coke '(m)any Western societies have attempted to repress the instinctual drive to satisfy this urge or curiosity about unconventional sexual exploits' (Coke No. 42, P.6). This would certainly seem valid with reference to the Church's teaching in Irish society. He continues with reference to Witkin that he 'connects with past both in manners and philosophy to create a new iconography the relates to contemporary social behaviour' (ibid P.18).

For Witkin the compulsions driving the masochist are very much the same as those of the ascetic scourging the flesh for spiritual gratification. For example, see his photograph entitled Penitente (Fig.18) which shows a set of three crosses, a large central one showing a human crucifixion with two smaller ones either side with crucified monkeys. The three figures have numbers scrawled across their chests. This relates to a group of fervent monks who call themselves the Penitente, and who practise the bizarre annual ritual of crucifying one of their fold as a sort of penitential re-enactment of Christ's crucifixion. This brutal act must supposedly serve as a symbolic purging of their sins.

Whether Witkin's approach actually serves to make us 'contemplate' anything at all (as Van Deren Coke likes to think) is debatable, and it could be argued that society in general seems, for better or for worse, to be handling this 'de-mystification' process of the taboos of Religion and Sex to great effect without the help of the postmodern artists, so then the question inevitably arises; what need is there of them? If the answer to this is, as Van Deren Coke would put forward, to provide a structure or direction to this development in society, then another question arises; are they actually creating a new iconography and giving

FIG. 18: JOEL-PETER WITKIN; <u>PENITENTE</u> (1982)

direction   as they say, or are they just contributing to its demise? It is this question which I attempt to answer in Section Two of the thesis.

For the moment though it is important to see why Postmodernism seems to have chosen as its main ally the photographic process, because, as I will show later, it is this alliance (as in the work of Witkin) that best demonstrates the essential failures of Postmodernism.

Each moment in history has its own form of artistic expression, one that reflects the political climate, the intellectual concerns and the tastes of the period. this 'taste' isn't a whim either; it's the product of well-defined conditions that characterize the social structure at each stage of its evolution. Photography appears to be the mode of expression most suited to these times. It is evident that there's scarcely an aspect of human activity in which it is not used in one form or another, and in that it plays an essential role in contemporary life. It has become indispensable to both science and industry. It provides the basis for mass media, the cinema, television and video. Thousands of newspapers and magazines print millions of photographs daily.

A Photographic theory of particular interest to this thesis is suggested by John Berger (No. 7). He suggests that the camera has now replaced the eye of God, noting that the decline of religion corresponds with the rise of the photograph, saying that the "transformation may not be as surprising as it may first seem" (ibid, P.53). The super-natural, omniscient, all-seeing eye of God was now available to mankind. It was possible to record otherwise unwitnessed events, giving the viewer access and control to whole new experiences.

The moment the shutter is opened, 'Judgement' is passed. If all events are seen by the camera instantaneously, outside time, by a super-natural eye, the distinction between remembering and forgetting is transformed into an act of judgement. The ubiquitous camera decides what events shall go down in history, choosing to ignore some as unfit for remembrance, thus 'damning' them to oblivion. 'Recognition is close to *being remembered*, and condemnation is close to *being forgotten*' (ibid, P.53). This is especially true in an electronic age where catasrophes like famine and war only remain in popular consciousness as long as they are reported by the media.

So now we see that for a practice like Postmodernism that purports to tell us where the 'old' God has gone wrong, what better way to put forward their new ideology than through the 'new' God?

SECTION TWO:
AGAINST POSTMODERNISM AND
JOEL-PETER WITKIN

In this section I will attempt to show that, although Postmodernism's goals have been acheived in the area of Photography as I have shown, its attempts at combating the notion of the centralized entity called 'Culture' have essentially failed due to its methods.

One of the premises of postmodernism is a reflection and lamentation on the now defunct notion of 'Culture' as I mentioned in the introduction. But the question about which comes first, the chicken or the egg, then arises with reference to art and societal practices. It's of course obvious in this case that at any given time art practices and past and present ideological trends all develop, combine and interact simoultaneously. Art and Society are a reflection of each other and always have been, which makes the postmodernists 'lamentation' seem stupid. It seems pointless to try and de-cry anything of which you are an integral part, and more than that; of which they *try* and be an integral part (criticizing from within).

The label of Postmodernism means that we start heralding the triumph of the intellect over the imagination, of criticism over creation, in that if this art is constructed as a consideration of itself we find that the artist (as original,creative genius) is exchanged for the critic. Art is produced for the critics and not for the public and this makes it aloof and smug. And when remembering as I said that Postmodernism was born originally to attack the hollow 'liberal humanist' message of Modernism it seems that it has fallen into the same trap.

A Postmodern play and a Postmodern painting, whilst having many differences, will be sure to share one thing in common; they will be about themselves. Similarly, when you are reading a 'Postmodern' book, and you turn the page and the writer sticks his/her head out of the page and says 'hello,' then you know that you're reading a 'Postmodern' book. You also know that you're smart. Like with the new trend in cigarette advertisements where the whole idea is that you think you're a clever person if you can work out what cigarette is being advertised, thus you think that this must be a clever person's cigarette, so you start smoking

it. Well it looks like the same is true of the intellectual art of Postmodernism. People who think they can 'spot' it think they're clever and start seeing it everywhere, which creates this attitude of a 'smug' art.

All sorts of criticisms have been levelled at Postmodernism like those of Anne Gregory who says that when Charles Jencks talks about a return to classicism in art and architecture (like Witkin's work which has the outward appearance of the old Daguerrotype photographs and could be equated with the outwardly classical appearance of other postmodernist paintings) he is indulging in a "perennial popular preference for kitsch." She claims that only a fool would mistake this "Disneyland Classicism" for an "Appollonian vision sense of light and reason, or Dionysiac frenzied ecstasy" (Gregory No. 13, P.145).

I think however that this kind of criticism is missing the main problem with Postmodernism. In this case I could defend the Postmodernists because I think she is overlooking the fact that they are trying to explore the literal truth in preference of many meanings, and the paintings of artists like Carlo Maria Mariani, Martha Mayer Erlebacher, Edward Schmidt or Milet Andrejevic may be classical in appearance but that does not mean that they are proposing a return to classicism. In fact the opposite is the case, for example, Carlo Maria Mariani's Il Pittore Mancino (1982) (No. 26)(Fig.19), oil on canvas, has a classical seated robed figure painting a baby he is holding by a leg. This is not in keeping with the style from which the imagery was taken, instead it is an exploration of representation in keeping with a post-structuralist approach, ie parodic. In short what is favoured is an allegorical abstraction of the image to get rid of the singularity of meaning and the concreteness of such classical symbolism.

FIG. 19: CARLO MARIA MARIANI; <u>IL PITTORE MANCINI</u> (1982)

Where I think criticism should be levelled is not really in the *use* of parody (although it has been described as parasitic and derivative; F.R. Leavis said it was the 'philistine enemy of creative genius and vital originality')(Leavis No. 24, P.74), but in the actual *effect* this usage has in the end. The process of imitation that is so much a part of Postmodernism means that what is produced is art about art itself which is what makes it seem to be 'clever,' aloof and alienating.

By the use of parody they purport to incorporate critical commentary within their own art "in a kind of self-legitimating short-circuit of the normal critical dialogue" (Hutcheon No. 20, P.9). This follows what Jean-Francois Lyotard is quoted as claiming demonstrates the "lack of faith in systems requiring extrinsic validation" (in a lecture (1981) called The Postmodern Condition as quoted by Hutcheon, No. 20, P.64), as suffered in advanced capitalism.

Gregory L. Ulmer quotes Barthes discussing this new intellectual art; what is produced is "simultaneously theory, critical combat, and pleasure" (from 'Roland Barthes,' Ulmer No. 37, P.65).

This incorporation of critical commentary within their own art seems to be coming very close to a bland cop-out. Like I said; it's aimed towards itself and thus remains very insular. Hiding it seems, like in school play-ground days, behind 'jokes' (in this case literary allusions to historical codes) they're resigning themselves to the notion that it's impossible to do anything new, so why not just re-hash the old. This lethargic attitude seems to me to be very representative of the Post War era, and the Postmodernists are a product of this era as much as

anyone, but nevertheless I thought the Postmodern premise was to make us question; not subscribe to the lack of questioning as it could be seen to be doing through its mockery and insularity. It's a modern thing to be a fringe-sitter, a harper on words. So then could the failure of Modernism to represent Reality be similar to the failure of Postmodernism to make us question that representation of Reality?

EXPOSING THE WHITMAN/WITKIN VISION

In the wake of liberal humanism came Postmodernism and the Whitmanesque vision as I have already discussed. The Postmodernists thought that they could show how the message of the Family of Man exhibition was elitist.

Walt Whitman thought that he was not abolishing beauty but universalizing it. He thought, like Diane Arbus, that each precise object or condition or combination or process exhibits a beauty' (Sontag No. 34, P.26) so that 'beauty' could be found in anything at all. What he meant in effect was that no moment is more important than any other moment, no person is more interesting than any other person. Now though, this kind of attitude has turned pious; the Whitmanesque photographer now patronizes reality. Whitman was quoted in the epigraph for a book of Walker Evans photographs published by the Museum of Modern art as saying that:

'I do not doubt but the majesty and beauty of the world are latent in any iota of the world...I do not doubt there is far more in trivialities, vulgar persons, slaves, dwarfs, weeds, rejected refuse, than I have supposed...'

This could be compared with the quote by Witkin;

'I guess that I've come to realise that there's a form of beauty in everything. In every form there's a certain gracefulness.' (Grundberg No. 14, P.64)

For the modern American photographers though who have matured since World War II, Witkin being one of them, the idea of recording America candidly in all its facets doesn't really work. Susan Sontag picked up this point saying that '(a)merican photogaphy has moved from affirmation to erosion to, finally, a parody of Whitman's program' (Sontag No.34, P.27). Walker Evans was the last great photographer to work in a mood deriving from Whitman's 'euphoric humanism' (ibid P.27). But he broke with this vision in that he found Steiglitz (who propagandized the Whitmanesque vision) too arty.

Like Whitman then (and Witkin now) Steiglitz saw no contradiction between using Photography as a method of identification with the community and also as a method of aggrandizing the artist as a self-expressing ego. Joel-Peter Witkin's work also follows that mode of thought, and in fact much if not all of his work could be seen as an attempt at rendering himself infamous. An immediate reaction on first seeing his work is shock and the idea tha that 'Witkin is a nutter.' His photographs say little or nothing about the subjects themselves. He has managed merely to steal from their privacy to show us the kind of company he likes to keep. This is in keeping with what Sontag says about the new wave of social commentators/artists; 'in photographing dwarfs, you don't get majesty and beauty, you get dwarfs' (ibid P.27). So Witkin appears, although working within

the framework of Postmodernism, to be contributing nothing to its practice as outlined earlier.

On the other hand Walker Evans sought a more impersonal kind of affirmation and a more lucid understatement. He was not trying to express himself in the architectural still-lifes of American facades and the inventories of rooms that he loved to make. There is no comparison between Witkin and Evans as social chroniclers.

The most striking aspect of Witkin's work is that he has enrolled in the school of art photography that concentrates (like Diane Arbus) on victims, on the unfortunate, but without the compassionate purpose that such a project is expected to serve. His work shows people who are pathetic, pitiable, as well as repulsive, but it does not arouse any compassionate feelings. The photographs have been praised for their candor, for an unsentimental empathy with their subjects: 'his pictures seem demonic but at the same time humanistic; that is, we can empathetically respond in a personal way rather than in a scientific or cosmic fashion to his characterizations' (No. 42, P.18). If this were true it would indeed be in keeping with postmodernisms ethic of breaking down old standards in favour of subjective response. But I think his attitude could be more correctly described as a dissociated point of view. What is actually their aggressiveness towards the public has been treated as a moral accomplishment: that the photographs don't allow the viewer to be distant from the subject. Witkin's photographs in my mind with their acceptance of the appalling, suggest a naivete which is both coy and sinister, because it is based on distance, on privilege, on a feeling that what the viewer is asked to look at is really alien. It's naive to think

that these photographs give us 'an intimate view of the dark side of our makeup' (ibid, P.18). All they do is alienate.

This alienation is acheived through the shock impact of his work. A photograph that shoves some new zone of human misery in our faces cannot make a dent in public opinion unless there is an appropriate context of feeling and attitude. oral feelings are embedde in history, and the situations are always specific. So this really rules out the empathic response to Witkin's work as his figures are so stiffly posed and the scenarios so staged that they are therefore removed from any sense of reality as we know it. The quaintly neo-Daguerre look of his work does give us a sense of immediate attraction, but Van Deren Coke says that this makes us think about and contemplate their many implications (No. 42, P.6). I think that there is really little to contemplate in Witkin's work; the photographs as objects are what attracted me to them. Their acknowledgement of their own processes of production, the throw-backs to the photographic processes of Daguerre and Steiglitz, the parody of specific works and their blatant dis-regard for Religious and sexual taboos all contributed to their classification in my mind as Postmodern works.

However, the more I thought about it, the more I realised that their categorization as Postmodern didn't in itself prove that they contribute anything to a new Postmodern understanding of culture as they are supposed to if they were truly of that art practice.

In fact there is only one photograph of his that I have seen that might really force us to question our present value systems. The photograph is called The Tests of

Christ (1981) and appeared in a catalogue for the Gallery of Photography in Dublin (Coleman No. 9A). It depicts a naked figure in a straight-forward portrait pose against a plain backdrop wearing a mask (typical Witkin devices which enhance the feelings of alienation) and a crown of nails. Attached to either side of the figures head are two fetuses. There was no accompanying explanation in the text, but for me this was a very strong and evocative image. It reminded me of a very similar piece done by a scottish artist which was a figurative sculpture with two real fetuses nailed to each ear. I remember there was a big public outcry at the exhibition and the piece was subsequently taken down, but it served to raise some important points with respect to our present value systems. The law states that these fetuses are not human beings but inanimate objects to be used at will, but when confronted with the truth we get upset because it threatens us. Of course, it also serves to point out that this manner of statement however valid also serves to repel (as seen by the forced removal of the piece from public display) instead of stimulate. Although I don't know how well or badly Witkin's similar work was received by the morally up-tight Irish when it arrived at the Gallery of Photography, I can't imagine that the reaction would be much different (although in Witkin's case the impact would be diluted because it's only a photographic representation of the reality of 'fetus as art')

Although this specific example was in my mind thought-provoking, in general this type of assault on our sensibilities serves only to numb us from an emotive response. The quality of feeling, including moral outrage, that people can muster in response to photographs of the oppressed, the exploited, the starving and the massacred depends on their degree of familiarity with these images. Susan Sontag says that 'photographs shock insofar as they show something novel' (Sontag No.

34, P.17). I don't quite agree; I think that photographs shock insofar as they show something familiar in a novel way. I can't really have a truly emotional response to something of which I know nothing. It's like trying to look through a complete strangers photographic album of his family. It just doesn't have that same relevance, if any at all. That's where I think Witkin's photographs don't really work. They have an immediate dull shock effect but it's hollow. I can't relate to these people or to the idea that what he's representing is any aspect of reality.

Susan Sontag said that the images of Bergen-Belsen and Dachau were the ones that shocked her the most profoundly. It was the immediate impact of the images that first affected her; she said she did not understand the full implications until much later. she came across them in 1945 in a bookshop and said of them; '(n)othing I have seen - in photographs or in real life - ever cut me as sharply, deeply, instantaneously' (Sontag No. 34, P.17). She even went so far as to divide her life into two parts; before and after she saw the photographs.

In the Summer of 1989 I had the opportunity of seeing Dachau myself. The experience created a lot of conflicting feelings. The conflict is one of feeling that you should be moved, then you feel guilty if you aren't, and if you are you wonder if it's just a token gesture of identification, or then again is it real? At the time I remember a friend saying he was 'bored' with it all, and of course then I could flare up in self-righteous indignation, but on thinking about it I wasn't really 'moved' either. With reference now to the point made about the alienating aspect of Witkin's photographs, it seems that I could draw a simplified comparison. For me it was as if the Nazi aim of de-personalization had worked. It was difficult to relate to such extreme circumstances or conceive of these naked

shaved and mutilated bodies as even human. They were dissociated from any sense of reality as I could know it; even the backdrop to their emaciated selves was an alien one - the austerity and bleakness of the camps. Even in this extreme case where the full implications behind the photographs were known to me in advance, my reaction was the same as it was to Joel-Peter Witkin; a cold shock.

There was also a set of photographs there depicting the people being rounded up off the streets to be transported to the camps. These were easier to look at obviously, which gave you the opportunity and inclination to pause and really look at them. Ordinary, everyday people in their working clothes. Men, women and children like any you might see on the streets today who you knew were about to die. These images were for me more poignant and 'meaningful' in a way that the camp ones weren't; I could *relate* to them (in whatever simplified way).

If my apathy when faced with the reality of the camps was due to to my own inability to respond, it was also due in part to the developments in society since 1945 and the unfortunate fact that along with the general increase in Photography, the photographic images of horror have increased too. The ante keeps getting raised, and whereas in 1945 when Susan Sontag first saw the Dachau photographs, we now have a situation where the very proliferation of such images (like Don mcCullin's photographs of emaciated Biafrans in the early 1970's) has led to a certain numbness. Statistics have shown that by 1982 nearly fifty per cent of films made were horror or science fiction (No. 42, P.6). And of course we can add to this the impact of the enormous amount of readily available pornographic material.

In the face then of this kind of climate, surely a response like the impersonal and extreme one of Joel-Peter Witkin could only serve as an unbearable replay of a now familiar atrocity exhibition.

We also have to ask ourselves why do we look at them? These kind of images don't just appear out of the blue, we actually *enjoy* looking at them. It's a voyeuristic activity like the morbid curiosity of old people when an ambulance pulls up, but it's also masochistic in a way that is kind of frightening in its implications for society. It's like being in a fairground; we go to the most dangerous ride to prove to ourselves and others that we can take it. We try to overcome our squeamishness; to supress an emotional response. This acceptance then, and even our enjoyment of, the vulgar means that instead of becoming more thoughtful and open (as no doubt we would like to see ourselves in this New Age) we become colder and more callous. This then actually detracts from us as individuals and reduces our 'social conscience.'

In our middle-class, suburban and increasingly monotonous lives we need a new thrill, we enjoy seeing misfortune as a kind of armchair adversity because it serves to consolidate our ideas about the 'otherness' of suffering. The more we see of horror the more we see that we are not part of that experience and the more aloof we become. Witkin goes in search of painful situations, but of course the actual act of photographing something, although it is aggressive, is essentially one of non-intervention: to take a photograph of something you have to step back from it. Neither we as viewers nor Witkin as photographer want to identify with the depicted situation, we want it to establish more firmly our identity as

members of a white, middle-class, suburban, heterosexual, patriarchal society by establishing that these atrocities that we see are not part of our proud culture.

Also the shock of photographed atrocities wears off after repeated viewing. Our sense of taboo which regulates what we see as sorrowful or obscene is not very strong and in recent years it has been tested to the full. The huge photographic catalogue of misery and injustice throughout the world has given everyone a familiarity with atrocity, making the horrible seem more ordinary, remote from our experience, and inevitable. The IRA for example has come to realise that the British public have become numbed to the attrocities being commited in the North, so they raise the ante by moving it to English soil. In this fashion horror after horror piles up and society continues 'like a roller coaster that gives an illusion of speed and movement but merely turns on its pivot' as the author Gunther Grass put it (No. 12, P.96). At the time of the first images of the Nazi camps there was nothing banal about these images. After thirty years, a saturation point may have been reached. In the last few decades, 'concerned' photography has done at least as much to deaden conscience as to arouse it. Joel-Peter Witkin's postmodern 'ethic' then flies out the window along with his supposed power to make us contemplate; all he does is make the intolerable tolerable.

So whereas his photographs are outwardly subscribing to the postmodern critique of the hollow humanist message of High Modernism, they do nothing to personalize experience. On the contrary, all his subjects are equivalent. Instead of showing identity between things which are different (Postmodernism's purported bias), everybody is shown to look the same. Instead of playing the field of photographic images, he chooses to shock us with images from a single source.

These turn out to be just as aloof and naive in their representation as the photographs in Steichen's <u>Family of Man</u> exhibition as mentioned earlier. Steichen's Modernist approach and Witkin's Postmodernist approach equally rule out an understanding of reality; Steichen from the right and Witkin from the left.

The fact that Tradition in the west is on a swift decline, as seen by such developments as 'Drive-In Sanctuaries' and 'the Aggressive Christian Military Corps,' is certainly a matter of concern for most people, but to think that that which purports to oppose this decline on all fronts is actually that which is contributing to its demise is even worse.

Joel-Peter Witkin's photographs are neither ground-breaking nor revolutionary (as can be seen by the fore-running work of Diane Arbus) and are important only for the fact that they were conceived and constructed within the flux of pluralism and thus serve to illustrate the problems inherent in the Postmodern debate.

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