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THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART & DESIGN

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**THE CULT OF REMEMBRANCE
A DISCUSSION OF THE PHOTOGRAPHS OF
MATT MAHURIN**

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ILLUSTRATIONS

To facilitate the reader I have placed the illustrations accompanying this written submission in a separate bound volume. The number of illustrations involved could have been accommodated in the volume containing the written text but the flicking forwards and backwards involved in examining illustrations connected to a written text can be awkward and annoying. I trust my solution to this problem is convenient to the reader.

List of illustrations:

1. Nicaragua 1987. [16.]
2. Paris 1988. [16.]
3. Nicaragua 1987. [16.]
4. Nicaragua 1987. [16.]
5. Haiti 1988. [16.]
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8. Nicaragua 1987. [16.]
9. Harlem 1988. [16.]
10. Texas Prison 1985. [16.]
11. Texas Prison 1985. [16.]
12. Texas Prison 1985. [16.]
13. Offering the buffalo skull - Mandan 1908. [9. p. 125.]
14. Clayoquot woman in Cedar bark hat 1915. [9. p. 169.]
15. Agnes E. Meyer, New York 1910. [21. p. 59.]
16. George Bernard Shaw, London 1907. [21. p. 77.]

INTRODUCTION

The work of Matt Mahurin has interested me over a period of years. initially the interest was stimulated by his editorial illustrations for American magazines and, latterly, by his photographic and video work. In dealing with his photographs it is necessary to question the nature of the attraction. Here, I investigate why his work appeals to me.

In order to understand the work more fully, it was found necessary to place Matt Mahurin's work in a context partly of my own construction and partly dictated by the world of photo-journalism or documentary photography. This context consists of :

1. An understanding of the roles of 'Public' and 'Private' photography.

Private photography in this discussion means family or familial photographs, any photographs where the viewer knows and/or is involved with the subject photographed. This sense of involvement effects an individual's interpretation of any public photograph such as in advertising or documentaries. In the field of public photography, advertising and documentary styles and formats can be perceived as direct opposites or polarities in the photographic experience but as will be discussed later, both aspects of photography serve the same cause in that they both support western industrial capitalist society.

2. A questioning of the notion of 'truth' in photography.

Arguments will be made which show that the uses of photography can be manipulative and indeed it can be used as persuasively as words in written or oral form.

Photography's truth, if it has any, is purely subjective.

- 3 A short but important indication of how involvement with the private photograph effects the reading of public photographs.

The above context was found necessary in order to help me decode some aspects of the

content of Matt Mahurins photographs. On a formal level his work has an 'old' feel, manifest both in its textural qualities and in the very basic nature of his use of light. In the discussion of his photographs on this level I will include reference to predecessors whose work he echoes visually but with regard to composition, space, light, form and texture I feel Matt Mahurin does not break significant new ground. Therefore an in depth discussion of his aesthetic would be superfluous to my argument. What interests me is *why* he applies this aesthetic to the situations he photographs and what effects the resultant images have on the viewer.

It must be pointed out that a great deal of Matt Mahurin's current work is in the field of popular music. Moving from editorial illustration to editorial photography early on, he found a crossover point by working for Rolling Stone magazine as a freelance photographer. Record sleeve work followed and soon after that he began making music videos for popular artists. He has made roughly 40 videos in the past four years. The chronology of the work dealt with in this thesis coincides with the pop music work. The work dealt with here is based on 'social and political themes mainly'. [12]

I acknowledge the arguments and accusations that might be levelled with regard to the throwaway nature of pop cultural images and the possible conflict of allegiances, intentions and meanings altered in the crossover. Mahurin himself acknowledges these points. But to tease them out here would involve a tangential path to the points I have considered, delving as it would into discussions around the post-modern melting pot of 'high' and 'low' culture.

The sincerity of approach to his work ('First of all to educate myself and then try, maybe, to take it a step further') [Ibid] I do not question here, indeed I do not doubt it. What I do wish to concentrate on are the difficulties and contradictions involved in making photographs in places of struggle to be seen by viewers in a society where there are 'more photographs than bricks'. [22. p.7]

CHAPTER ONE THE CONTEXT OF A PHOTOGRAPH

PART ONE INTERPRETATION OF THE PHOTOGRAPHIC IMAGE

'A photograph that brings news of some unsuspected zone of misery cannot make a dent in public opinion unless there is an appropriate context of feeling and attitude' [20. p.17] The above lines by Susan Sontag express the need for a context into which a photographic image must be placed in order to convey any real meaning to the viewer. This context can be a physical one. The sequence of pictures in a news magazine such as TIME, shapes the viewing pattern of the viewer and leads him/her along a linear, narrative path of interpretation which, coupled with the words on the pages, communicate the stories/events in a manner which is essentially predetermined. It is shaped by the ideological stance of the publication.

The context of the photographic image also has a flipside, or more accurately, an inside. This context is within each individual viewing any given image. It is a viewing 'pattern' or 'formation' which is a result of the culmination of the events and experiences in the life of the viewer, leading up to the moment that he/she looks at the image. In brief, there are as many interpretations of a photograph [even in a given physical context] as there are viewers. With the photograph, the interpretation is largely influenced by the viewer's previous exposure to other photographs. The different manifestations and uses of photography come into play here and a brief analysis is needed.

THE FORMATION OF A VIEWING PATTERN

In modern western society, a person is constantly exposed from birth to a multiplicity of mechanically reproduced images. The photograph and the televisual image are predominant in this flood of imagery. Within the range of photographs experienced there are many subdivisions which vary in form, content and purpose. These all play a part in the formation of a viewing pattern in the individual. The family album photograph

or 'snapshot' is important in this respect. Some relevant points are as follows:

1. Family photographs can be described often as portraits.
2. They involve children.
3. These photographs act as a visual familial 'memory'.

These three points; portraiture, children in photography and a sense of memory are important for later consideration of Matt Mahurin's photographs.

The perusal of a family album by a family member can be a moving experience. Remembrance of times past, loves lost, loved ones dead, children grown, places seen and events experienced is integral to the experience of flicking through one's family album. Involvement with the subjects of the photographs is a pre-requisite for effective meaning to be extracted. Now consider looking through the family album of a complete stranger. This is potentially a very tedious experience. Recognition of the fact that strangers have parallel experiences to one's own is possible but involvement, love or actual memory are not experienced. This sense of involvement with the subjects in photographs and the extracted meaning will resurface again in later discussion.

Other photographs experienced during the formative and adult years are news, travel, social documentary, educational, medical, movie stills, fashion, mugshots and pictures of heroes, be they musicians, actors, writers, painters, philosophers or footballers. Add to this list, which is familiar to almost everyone, technical photographic terms (ranging from cinephotomicrography through photospectroheliography to skiagraphy) and you have a form of image making which permeates the fabric of our society in every aspect of art, science and communication.

The viewing formation of each individual then, can be said to be the result of exposure

to any one of the infinite combinations of photographic experiences possible. Compound this idea with the ubiquity of the televisual experience in contemporary western society and you begin to appreciate the complexity of interpreting a photograph.

PART TWO THE SUBJECTIVITY OF PHOTOGRAPHIC 'TRUTH'

Men still kill one another, they have not yet understood how they live, why they live; politicians fail to observe that the earth is an entity, yet television (Telehor) has been invented: the 'far-seer'-tomorrow we shall be able to look into the heart of our fellow man, be everywhere and yet be alone; illustrated books, newspapers, magazines are printed - in millions. The unambiguousness of the real, the truth in the everyday situation is there for all classes. The hygiene of the optical, the health of the visible is slowly filtering through.[20.p.196]

The optimism of this quote, made by French photographer Lazlo Maholy-Nagy in 1925, is evident. He saw the ubiquity of mechanically reproduced images as a sign of victory for visual truth over subjective reportage in written or printed words. It is now 1990 and this optimism can be seen in perspective. We are no closer to any pure truths now than we were then. His words take for granted the integrity of the individuals entrusted with the responsibility of seeking images. Allowances should be made though, because his words pre-date the demarcation of 'private' and 'public' photographic boundaries. To a large extent this responsibility can be said to have been at worst, abused or else naively ignored. This allusion to 'truth' and the equation of seeing with understanding (which I will deal with later) at that time, is now perceived as a redundant notion in social documentary photography. Truth and understanding in public photography are wedged into a triangle of subject, photographer and viewer. This triangle can be sharpened or softened by the strength of ideological stance of any of the three elements. If the subject depicted is a leftwing guerrilla for example, and the viewer and photographer are rightwing activists, the resulting interpretation of the photograph would be different to that of the same viewer (rightwing) viewing a Nicaraguan contra (also rightwing) guerrilla in a photograph. Any masking of political or other ideological beliefs on the part of a photographer leads to confusion and photographic lies.

PUBLIC PHOTOGRAPHY'S STRENGTH

Within 30 years of the invention of photography, its uses were widespread and diverse. The first mass produced camera was sold in 1888. Cameras 'democratised' image-making. At the turn of the 20th century and for the first two decades of it, photography was finding its feet, marking itself into our consciousness and seeping into many facets of human existence. The boundaries between public and private photography became more clearly demarcated with the advent of photographic newspapers and photo-magazines (eg LIFE, 1936) in the U.S.A.. An unknowable parade of lives and cultures was presented for examination and digestion. They were 'real', they were 'true' depictions of other lives. There was no apparent reason why they shouldn't be easily assimilated by the masses thereby forming an anthropological, sociological, historical education in 'easy to swallow' picture form. Here, the public use of photography can be questioned.

Familial photographs (mentioned earlier as important to the building of a viewing pattern) are : 'read in a context which is continuous with that from which the camera removed it ' [5. p.50.] The sense of chronology and environment is readily understood by the viewer of a familial, private photograph. In the public photograph this sense of understanding the context from which the image has been removed, is impossible, thereby precluding involvement or action on the situations depicted in the photographs. This belies the supposed photographic 'truth' in social-documentary photography. Real meaning or understanding is almost impossible.

This public use of photography has not been challenged mainly because it forms a part of the political infrastructure behind the social forces which continue its propagation. This infrastructure supports the systems of industrial capitalism.

A capitalist society requires a culture based on images. It needs to furnish vast amounts of entertainment in order to stimulate buying and anaesthetise the injuries of class, race and sex. And it needs to gather unlimited amounts of information, the better to exploit the natural resources, increase productivity, keep order, make war,

give jobs to bureaucrats. The camera's twin capacities, to subjectify reality and to objectify it, ideally serve those needs and strengthen them. Cameras define reality in two ways essential to the workings of advanced industrial society as a spectacle (for the masses) and as an object of surveillance (for rulers). The production of images also furnishes a ruling ideology. Social change is replaced by a change in images - Susan Sontag [20. p.178]

Photographs plead, invite and challenge us to purchase commodities for our comfort and consumption. We are persuaded that we need this or that for our physical well-being, or that we need to do this or that to attain a higher social status. Our overall right to achieve this comfort or status, supposedly, is evidence that we are all equal. This presumption masks fundamental inequalities. How can these inequalities be addressed? Social documentary pursuits of a photographic or televisual nature are ideally attempts to inform and educate us as to the events and conditions in the world. Disasters, massacres, protests, victories, revolutions and celebrations are all there to be seen. Victims or champions of all these situations are sought and photographed.

THE ONGOING THIRST FOR SHOCKING IMAGES

Matthew Brady was a pioneering American daguerreotypist in the mid-nineteenth century. Through his contacts in high political office (he was Lincoln's official photographer) he obtained permission to take a photographic expedition into the battlefields of the civil war. The New York Times of October 20th 1862 reported:

'Mr Brady has done something to bring home to us the terrible reality and earnestness of war. If he has not brought the bodies and lain them in our doors, yards and along the streets, he has done something very like it.... The very features of the slain may be distinguished... lifeless lines of bodies, that lie ready for the gaping trenches.' [18.p.94.]

This fascination with the macabre has become a constant feature of our thirst for photographic authenticity. In this century we have seen Werner Bischoff's photographs of Indian famine victims in the early 1950s, Don McCullins photographs of emaciated Biafrans, printed in magazines perched on our coffee tables in the 1970s, and now the lat-

est documentary photographs of famine in Ethiopia and Sudan in 1985, 1988 and 1989. With each new round of photographs we are fascinated, shocked, horrified and ultimately numbed by images in 'an unbearable replay of a now familiar atrocity exhibition' [20.p.17]

SHOCKING IMAGES: HOW THEY DEPOLITICISE SITUATIONS

As cited earlier the taking of photographs in these situations and the relay of the photographs to us leaves us dizzy and scrambling for a contextual framework within which we can come to terms with these photographs. The physical deprivation depicted we can connect with. It is mainly this which shocks us. But beyond this, we gain no real understanding of underlying reasons, political, geographical or otherwise. The subjects remain unknown and unknowable to us. There are two identifiable reasons for this impasse which we reach in relation to this type of photograph.

1. John Berger suggests the argument that, as a result of the 'unknowability' of the victims portrayed, we feel a sense of inadequacy. We are almost present, witnessing, but the non-interventionist nature of photography prevents the observer from directly acting upon the situation depicted. The viewer then questions how such horror can come to pass with 'civilised' society looking on. The quickest response which alleviates immediate pain on the part of the victim, and anguish on the part of the viewer, is a financial contribution towards easing the circumstances. This approach encourages a charitable reaction to any given situation and effectively depoliticises the situation by diverting attention away from governmental responsibilities and towards a celebration of the compassion involved in material giving. This is a fundamental socialist/capitalist argument. The suffering continues.

2. The dichotomy experienced by the documentary photograph is succinctly put by Susan Sontag: 'The aestheticising tendency of photography is such that the medium which conveys distress ends by neutralising it.' [20.p.109.] The acquisitive nature of

photography, looking, then taking a photograph tends to overtake some questions of responsibility, compassion and justice. 'Despite the illusion of giving understanding, what seeing through photographs really invites is an acquisitive relation to the world that nourishes aesthetic awareness and promotes emotional detachment'. [20.p.111.] Photographic truth is a subjective notion which needs reassessment before progression can follow. We know not to believe what we read, now we need to add - don't believe what you see. What can be done then to counter what Susan Sontag calls '...a special, modern ethical construction: not hardhearted, certainly not cynical but simply (or falsely) naive'. [20.p.37.]

PART THREE COMPASSION, JUSTICE, JUDGEMENT

Having already considered the conflicts involved in trying to provide photographic truth (photographs which are instructive and aid understanding of other peoples lives), we need to consider the compassionate intent of the photographer in taking a photograph and presenting it to us. The idea of compassionate imagery is not new to the age of mechanical reproduction.

TRULY SUBVERSIVE IMAGES HAVE ALWAYS BEEN NEUTRALISED

In the history of oil painting, the relationships between subject, painter and eventual owner / viewers was a triangle of the three. John Berger made some observations with regard to 'genre' painting. Taking for example, Frans Hals Laughing Fisherboy, he noted how it depicted a 'low-life' figure, smiling and displaying his merchandise for purchase. He states that the inferences of this painting are :

1. The poor boy is happy.
2. That by buying his offerings, the rich owner/viewer is a source of hope for the poor boy and all the poor.[7.p. 103]

The actual purchase of this type of painting further enhanced the rich art buyers position on his (always a male) moral pedestal. It became a patronising, judgemental system based on ownership and social status regardless of the painterly concerns of the artist.

Another 'genre' painter was Adriaen Brouwer (1605 - 1638). He painted cheap tavern interiors and their patrons. He painted: 'with bitter and direct realism which precludes sentimental moralising. As a result, his pictures were never bought except by a few other painters such as Rembrandt and Rubens.' [Ibid]

This uncompromising challenge was unwelcome, and was neatly sidestepped by the ruling class of the time. If we jump forward three hundred years to 1937 and the fledgling LIFE magazine we see the Hungarian immigrant photographer André Kertész being rejected by the photographic editors because his photographs 'spoke too much'. [2.p.38.]

This line of reasoning is in order to point out that the governing systems within the public use of photographs can accomodate, consume or ignore certain images at will. As a result the viewing public unwittingly ignores the point of view presented in these 'unacceptable' images. Pictures which are ignored re-align the perspective of the protagonist/photographer and the status quo is maintained. Photographs which on the surface seem subversive are not necessarily so. Photographs which seem powerful initially can ultimately stagnate meaningful response.

AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH TO PHOTOGRAPHIC NARRATIVE

The description of a 'compassionate' photographer as one seeking justice for the oppressed should now be considered. The idea of justice is thrown up again and again in social documentary photography. It provides a link with right and righteousness. Justice is escapable in mortal existence but inescapable before a God. God being defined as the omnipresent eye, watching and noting for later judgement. Berger asks, in a secular society, 'has the camera replaced the eye of God? The decline of religion corresponds with the rise of the photograph' .[5.p.58.]

Atheism is central to theories of socialism. If earthly injustice is endured, in the belief that God will ultimately punish the adjudged wrongdoers, the injustice remains. It becomes passively endured and change is precluded. In a proposed secular, just society, historical judgement would replace the judgement of God. Replacing God's omnipresent eye gathering evidence, we would have photographic evidence gathered by the ubiquitous camera. Towards this end John Berger suggests an approach: 'For the pho-

tographer this means thinking of her or himself not so much as a reporter to the rest of the world, but, rather, as a recorder for those involved in the events photographed' [Ibid]

As to the use of photographs already in existence Berger states: 'The aim must be to construct a context for a photograph, to construct it with other photographs, to construct it with words, to construct it by its place in an ongoing text of photographs and images.' [5.p.60.]

This desire sounds at first, similar to my earlier description of linear photographic narrative as practised by TIME, LIFE etc. Berger could be accused of wanting to establish a socialist parody of these magazines. This is not the case as he states quite clearly that unilinear narrative is a railroading of emotions and associations. The narrative should reflect the working of human memory which works: 'radially, that is to say, with an enormous number of associations all leading to the same event' [Ibid]

This is the essential difference between his proposed narrative style and the method we already know. His approach could be a closer photographic approximation of truth, being honestly based on human memory. (This idea of memory and its link to photography will be dealt with more fully later).

However at the moment in both 'art' and 'documentary' photography we are witnessing a race to secure the most shocking image. We witness visual hyperbole, people photographing scenes of bestiality in 'Post Joel-Peter-Witkin' manner, for gallery walls. We see a British tabloid newspaper's front page publication of a photograph depicting the naked body of a man, himself a photojournalist, lying dead on a mortuary slab, having died in crossfire in Central America. He was seeking an image that could never have competed with the savage, voyeuristic and ultimately ironic photograph which his own death provided for our crazed consumption.

CHAPTER TWO A DISCUSSION OF MATT MAHURIN'S PHOTOGRAPHS

PART ONE CONTENT

'The literal can traumatise - but no disturbance ; the photograph can shout, not wound.... I am interested in them (as I am interested in world), I do not love them' - Roland Barthes [2. p.41.] Having had our consciousness bombarded constantly with harrowing images throughout the history of photography, the barrage is now compounded by the televisual experience. We need to consider where to turn in this numbing flood of unlovable images. It is against the background already discussed and in the face of the question of where to turn, that I discuss the photographs of Matt Mahurin.

In choosing photographs for discussion, I have mainly taken images from the book Matt Mahurins Photographs. [16] As is the nature of many photography books, a certain kind of narrative is set up in this book. The sequential picture by picture, page by page arrangement, traditional to most books is not tampered with here, but there is a significant difference in the system used to title the photographs.

The plates are numbered one to forty-seven and a title page is included at the end (rather than at the beginning) of the book. In this way a purely photographic method of presentation is visible.

The contexts from which the images have been seized is not indicated. In looking through the book, the viewer's viewing formations come into play and a series of associations is triggered. This method of interpretation is encouraged (or demanded) by the visual text and the viewer makes personal insights and derives personal conclusions from the photographs. When at the end of the sequence the viewer comes across the title page, he/she sees the titles corresponding to the plate numbers. The titles give the place and year of the photograph, nothing else. No other information is given as to the possible subdivisions within the society or institution photographed. We learn nothing

of the subjects' names, religious or political persuasions which would allow very specific associations to be made. The titles are enough to react against any pre-conceived notions a viewer might have with regard to any of the locations involved. Place names like Harlem, New York City, Paris, Texas prison, Nicaragua and Haiti have different systems of associations and cross-references for each individual viewer. The titles, when known to correspond to particular photographs, reactivate the picture in the viewer's consciousness. This reactivation can reinforce preconceived notions or invert them. The conditioning by mass-media photography is here challenged somewhat by an individual making new visual decisions and presenting them in a personal manner.

'Ultimately, photography is subversive not when it frightens, repels or even stigmatises, but when it is pensive, when it thinks.' -Roland Barthes [2.p.38.]

With regard to the physical context of the photographs in the book and its narrative, I have chosen to work outside of it and to present the chosen images in my own narrative in order to communicate what, to me, are relevant chords running through Matt Mahurin's work. Some of the photographs included have been published as editorial photographs and some had not been published until they were included in the book. I consider the distinction irrelevant to my discussion at this stage.

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, the viewing pattern of the viewer influenced by familial photographs is important when considering Matt Mahurin's work. The three important points of photographic portraiture, photographing children and the idea of photographs as memory, are relevant in family photographs. The sense of involvement, responsibility and understanding are played upon by Mahurin's photographs. This is particularly true of the photographs I will discuss first. The idea of photographs as memory is dealt with in Part Two of this chapter.

First of all, consider Fig. 1. In it we see the emerging figure of a naked child. A parental hand holding a comb, reaches out in encouragement to the child. The boy is apprehensive. In this photograph there are various elements which draw us inwards, inviting

us to think. There is the child, naked, vulnerable and in need of protection. That protection is possible through the hand of the parent, offering attention and grooming for the child, albeit with the gnarled hands moulded by a life of hardship and labour. In the context of the book we learn that this photograph comes from Nicaragua. Immediately the images of revolution, armed resistance, counter revolution and human deprivation, communicated by previous photographic and televisual experience, come to mind by association. We now have a hint as to the probable squalor from which the child emerges. The content of the photograph is suddenly deepened to include unseen details. The child is within miles of scenes of revolution and political upheaval. Relevant to this photograph is the quote that content is 'that which the work betrays but does not parade' - Panofsky [19.p.79.] The socio-political content of this image is referred to by association. It is inferred.

Consider now Figure 2. Here we see two more boys this time at play. They are fully clothed, well dressed, and well groomed. They are engrossed in their game and oblivious to the camera/photographer/viewer. There is no fear of the camera. An atmosphere of 'normality' is achieved. The boys are set against a light ground, even in texture, providing a well lit, safe environment for them. The setting is Paris. To my mind, no associations are triggered to suggest anything other than a stable European environment in which the children will happily grow.

In Figure 3, the viewer is returned to Nicaragua, to inspect the roughened bare feet of two more boys, (presumably they are brothers as Fig 4 suggests. The images follow one another in the context of the book). The ground is hard and dirty, the feet sit squarely in the dust and the toenails are curiously bleached. In Figure 4 the camera has moved backwards and upwards to frame the torsoes and held hands of the brothers. One is taller, older than the other. He holds the hand of the other tightly, protectively. They both wear trousers with elasticated waist- bands. The trousers were originally light in colour but are now stained and tattered. They are garments worn to cover nakedness, nothing more. The young skin of the boys is dirty and marked. A tension exists in the picture. The framing is that of a parent's view upon inspecting and scolding

children tattered from 'horseplay'. No play is hinted at here. The clutching hands suggest a fear of the photographer/viewer. Being photographed is an alien experience for them. The familial reading pattern is again used to involve us.

The documentary, 'true', nature of photographs led to the popularity of mass produced 'snapshot' cameras upon their invention. Families could now document the growth and development of their family unit, proving the occurrence of certain events to their children later on, and reminding themselves. The photograph of the Parisian boys could almost be one from a family album, such is the ordinariness of their activity. A French sociological study in the early seventies discovered: '...a household with children is twice as likely to have at least one camera, as a household in which there are no children' - Susan Sontag [20.p.7.]

This observation would hardly apply in contemporary Central-America. In that part of the world, poverty dictates the possible range of possessions. Cameras would be well down the list of priorities. The first photographs from there that spring to mind are journalistic -horror photographs and the photographic books of the 'disappeared' perused regularly by the 'mothers of the disappeared'.

In Figure 5, from Haiti, we see another boy, isolated in a grimy, windowless man-made interior, with only rubbish nearby. The sense of division between the world's 'haves' and 'have-nots' is again re- iterated in a strong visual statement.

However, the feelings of inadequacy referred to in the previous chapter, which created a barrier between viewer and subject is here lessened to a degree. Although dealing with places devastated by socio-economic forces such as post-Duvalier Haiti and post-Somoza Nicaragua, the images do not alienate with shock and violence. Instead they draw you in involving you with the subjects in a detailed, focussed, physical manner. With the guilt of inadequacy banished, gone is the thoughtless money throwing reflex, to ease consciences. This opens up the path for consideration on a responsible political level.

A similar line of thought is applicable to Figures 6, 7 and 8. The comparisons between the children and their environments is similar to the discussion of the boys' environments. With the photographs of the girls, other ideas are presented. In Figures 6 and 7 we see young girls in settings, both in Paris, that contain no obvious threat. They are immaculately dressed and in an environment of architectural serenity. Yet two of them display physical signs of distress. Now look at Figure 8. We see a Nicaraguan girl, holding some food and stifling laughter. As pointed out previously in relation to Frans Hals, the question of the responsibility of the viewer towards the subject is presented. Can we deduce that because the girl laughs and eats, and the Parisian girl cries, that we all share the same problems? It would be a thoughtless conclusion to a facile enquiry, given the context against which I have chosen to consider these photographs.

An interesting link between the young girls on different sides of the world is the similarity in their dress (Figures 7 and 8). Given the traditional socially imposed codes of dress for children, the echo is still quite striking. The girl in Figure 8 is wearing a dress which was originally white or lightly coloured. It has not been washed recently. The colour white, redolent of virtue, truth, virginity and innocence has been stained and soiled with obvious symbolic connotations. On a more earthly level it also reiterates the latent content of unseen social conditions, where hygiene is difficult.

With regard to latent content and possible symbolic inferences, Figure 9 is interesting. Here we see a young girl, about twelve years old. She stands facing us, arms behind her back with legs and feet together. Between the viewer and her, runs a hose which meanders away into the distance. Her face is partially cut out by the frame, making identification difficult. The worm/snake-like wriggle of the hose, separating her from us, the protruding tongue, the young body approaching puberty and eventual womanhood, the viewer's height in relation to her and the vulnerability of her pose all suggest a child symbolically under threat. It is not a sinister threat, but an inevitable progression experienced by all children. The inferences are interesting and a common thread is located which transcends political, economic and social divides, emphasising the human.

If we move to Figures 10 and 11, (they are presented in sequence in the book also) we see photographs from within Matt Mahurin's own country, the U.S.A.. These photographs are from a Texas prison. The idea of a prison and its inmates forms a pattern of associations with the viewer. If the viewer is from a deprived background, the chances of familiarity are increased. If the viewer is from a privileged background the relationship is different. A moral distance is adopted and interpretations are inevitably derived from this distance. The photographic approach is intelligent. In Figure 10 and 11 we see the same man twice in a brief narrative. The prisoner awakes, looks up and sees us watching. All about him and on him are shadows of the bars and grilles denying his freedom. We are looking into a cage. He stares straight at us and moves forward. In Figure 11 he is close to the bars which restrict him. We had been peering between two bars at him. Now we have moved back from the bars as he advances. Eye contact is maintained and a smile is hinted at. The shadow of the grille now becomes like the mark of a branding iron, burnt into his forehead, marking him out. The term 'penal' institution has connotations of punishment rather than rehabilitation. His challenging stare questions us and our moral stance in relation to his incarceration. Questions about the nature of a society that has man remove the freedom of other men for particular reasons are raised. The sequence of opinion triggered by this picture is totally subject to the political predisposition of the viewer. Is he a victim of society or is society his victim? The fact that Mahurin zones in on the human and suggests the architecture of restriction encourages thought in a spontaneous way.

In Figure 12 we move to a different aspect of the prison system. In it is depicted a bare chested, 'well-built', tattooed man. He is pictured from chest level, increasing his physical stature within the frame. He looks away, teeth clenched inside a closed mouth and hair sleeked back in 'fifties' style. He is extensively tattooed, the most immediately noticeable one being a clichéd image of a woman in a submissive pose. Also visible are adornments depicting; the grim reaper, a girl's name (Linda) and a floating Chinese dragon-mask. The intention of the subject (helped by Mahurin's framing) is to communicate exaggerated 'maleness' in an institution populated solely by males, deprived of female company for prolonged periods. No sense of dealing with his incarceration is

hinted at by the subject and remorse is not a consideration either. How do we react to this image and pose from within a penal institution, within our society ? A middle-class 'liberal' could find it alien and distasteful. A companion of the subject may find it merely similar to a heroic glamour shot of a sporting hero. Again questions are encouraged by a deliberate concentration on the individual in the situation.

To say that Matt Mahurin's images deal with figures from the 'underbelly' of society would be clichéd. To attach monumental political significance to the work would be naïve. But to propose that he has used photography in a way that encourages thought, or a re-thinking of preconceptions, is fair. His images come from areas that do not enter the public consciousness on a primary level every day, but they are places and issues that people are aware of simply through continuous mass media information. The way he uses photographs to step back from the screaming headlines and bleeding images which have numbed us, is fresh and original in contemporary photography. The lack of deadlines within hours, and the absence of picture editors demanding visual sledgehammers, allows a contemplative and thoughtful approach producing images which slowly release strength.

PART TWO MEMORY AND INVOLVEMENT

'For me the noise of time is not sad: I love bells, clocks and watches- and I recall the first photographic implements were related to techniques of cabinet making and the machinery of precision: cameras in short, were clocks for seeing. ' - Roland Barthes [2.p.15.]

The initial reaction when looking 'at', as opposed to 'into', Matt Mahurin's photographs, is to the physical qualities of the images, their form. Associations are triggered here too. They look 'old'. They are tinged with pathos. In texture and compositional simplicity they are beautiful photographs. Yet their subject matter is disquieting. Without falling into descriptive clichés (eerie, sombre, atmospheric etc.) how does the viewer consider the physical qualities of the photographs and their relationship with the situations photographed ?

It is important to point out here that I regard Matt Mahurin's aesthetic as owing to predecessors to some degree. It is not plagiarism but at the same time, on a formal level, not much new ground is broken. His debt to predecessors I will discuss shortly. What interests me is why he applies this aesthetic to chosen situations. Is Matt Mahurin merely applying an aesthetic at random to causes which are 'right-on', the concerns of the western, white middle-class generation of 'thirty-something' ? The following discussion is relevant to this accusation.

PHOTOGRAPHS AS 'TRUTHFUL' MEMORY

The idea of photographs as a collective historical memory is again important. Other aspects which must be considered are the ideas of 'truth' and 'beauty' in photographs. The familial photographs influence on viewing formation also resurfaces.

'Photographs are not so much an instrument of memory as an invention of it or replacement' - Susan Sontag [20.p.165.]

Firstly I will consider the photograph as a 'piece' of memory. Taking the expected life of a photographic print to be 10 years, and the exposure time necessary to be a fraction of a second, the ratio of an instant to its visual preservation is roughly 20,000,000,000:1 [5.p.51.]. This is a strong illustration of how small contextual 'truths' can be taken and preserved by man for later consideration. These pieces as I mentioned previously can be accumulated as 'evidence'. But where did the supposed truthfulness of photographs come from ? We understand that the image in a photograph is made by light physically reflecting off the subject and activating a chemical which forms the image. So we can say that a photograph is faithful to the appearance of the subject but again, what is 'truth' in a photograph ?

At first the secularisation of the capitalist world during the 19th century elided the judgement of God into the judgement of History in the name of progress. Democracy and science became agents of such a judgement. And, for a brief moment, as we have seen, photography was considered to be an aid to these agents. It is still to this historical moment that photography owes its ethical reputation as truth. [5.p.54.]

INFLUENCES

Edward Curtis was a settler in the relatively new city of Seattle in the late 19th century. During his childhood outside Seattle he observed how the advancing white Americans were displacing the native Indians. He perceived fundamental wrongdoing and a lack of compassion. Curtis set up one of the first successful photographic portrait studios in the U.S.A., when this was running successfully he found the chance to devote himself entirely to the task of photographically documenting Indian lives and customs for posterity. Throughout Curtis's 30 year project, the Indians were being killed and herded into reservations. His noble, poignant portraits of Indians at the time were charged with social and political issues which Curtis wished to see addressed. Looking at Figures 13 and 14 shows how Curtis approached his subjects. Overt political themes are not visible but the strength of the image lies in the understated nature, focussing on the individual or details connected to the individual. The formal surface qualities are quite similar to Mahurin's as is the compositional approach. Put very simply, Curtis's work

pre-empted Mahurin in it's humanism.

Edward Steichen came from a different background to Curtis. Steichen lived and worked in New York at about the same time (1900 - 1959 approx) as Curtis was working all over the western states of the U.S.A.. Steichen was a noted photographer by the age of 22 and quickly joined the photographer Alfred Steiglitz upon the latter's return to the U.S.A.. Steiglitz was championing the theories of pictorialist photography which he came across in England. Steichen concurred ideologically and the American pictorialist photographic movement was founded.

Pictorialism was a conscious reaction by some photographers against the 'democratisation' of photography by the mass produced camera. Suddenly everyone had become a photographer and the pictorialists perceived a cheapening of their art by ubiquitous amateurs. To distinguish themselves from the ordinary man/woman, they used laborious and technically tricky processes to emphasise the need for craftsmanship in photography. Their images alluded to classical forms in oil painting, often restaging actual compositions from paintings. The formal surface qualities of the early pictorialist photographs, particularly Steichen, owed more to etching and painting than they do to photography as we know it today. See Figure 15 and 16. In this way, pictorialist photography linked itself to the world of art and its traditionally held monopoly on formal notions of beauty.

Curtis and Steichen both worked through the time that John Berger cites as the moment of photography's truth. Can the formal qualities of their photographs be said to unconsciously imply truth? Is Matt Mahurin's aesthetic merely a hi-jacking of theirs in order to gain points on 'integrity' or timelessness ? Is Matt Mahurin striving to connect his images to the world of art and its monopoly on beauty ? This last question to my mind is closer to actuality but the reasons are on a deeper level.

Since Pictorialism in photography, the swift development of photographic art, embracing in turn modernism and postmodernism, coupled with the tangential evolution of

20th century painting, makes nonsense of the notion that Mahurin is simply a 'neo- pictorialist' photographer. It would be anachronistic and pointless. There is more to the discussion of the relationship between the form and content of his photographs.

THE CULT OF REMEMBRANCE

To give a more plausible insight into this relationship I now refer to a line of thinking put forward by Walter Benjamin [4.pp.219 - 253.]. It is necessary once more to refer to the three relevant aspects of Mahurin's work mentioned earlier. The influence of:

1. Photographic Portraiture.
2. Familial Photography.
3. The idea of photographs as memory.

All participate in the development of a viewing formation in the individual.

The earliest images made and used by man served a ritual purpose. They were reverential, devotional labour towards the supernatural being. These images were of the nature of cave paintings, a form of prayer, seeking supernatural aid in the hunting of animals. Through this association with an invisible God, the works attained an aura defined as a : 'unique phenomenon of a distance however close it may be' [4.p.224.]

This aura was carried through to the art commissioned and located in places of formal worship throughout history. These works, such as frescoes, mosaics and murals, were site specific. They were made for a context and could not be physically removed from that context. This maintained the aura of cult or ritual value in the work for the viewer.

When painting on canvas and then framing the image made non site-specific images possible, the cult value was transferred into the formal aspects of beauty and possession of the object itself. Moving forward we come to the late 19th and early 20th centu-

ry . Photography had been invented - a new way of creating images. This freed the restrictions on painting as it moved closer to abstraction. Photography absorbed, and sought through pictorialism, some of the cult value of the image, the art object.

In the early years of this century, the French photographer Eugene Atget took a series of photographs of deserted Paris streets. The documentary objective nature of these photographs was a significant break with the ritual and cult aspects of the image. The images had no figures onto which the viewer could latch. Human emotion was removed from the figure to inanimate objects. This step was one of many which led to photography moving in diverse tangents. The invention of television and video tapes along with their ubiquitous transmission all over the world, again, eased formal demands on photography. We live in the age when images are digitally coded onto discs, only to be seen with the aid of electricity and machine. The cult value of physically presented images has now been almost totally transformed into the cult of possession of the art object itself.

Bearing in mind the three aspects of Mahurin's photographs noted above, the following is important:

It is no accident that the portrait was the focal point of early photography. The cult of remembrance, of loved ones, absent or dead, offers a last refuge for the cult value of the picture. For the last time, the aura emanates from the early photographs in the fleeting expression of the human face. This is what constitutes the melancholy, in comorable beauty. But as man withdraws from the photographic image, the exhibition value for the first time shows its superiority to the ritual value. [4.p.228.]

Here then is an explanation which can be cited as a link to the figurative, melancholy photographs of Matt Mahurin. The familial reading patterns fall into place, as does the repeated attention to the human being, framed by an environment the dynamics of which exert physical and mental forces on him or her. The cult value of the image is alluded to in the formal qualities of the print. The cult of remembrance is induced in order to furnish a sense of memory within the viewer. Questions about the nature of one's role in society are encouraged. The responsibilities that are symbiotically entwined with the duties inherent in freedom are emphasised. Mahurin refers back to the fleeting moment of truth in photography in order to renew the sense of involvement necessary before mean-

ing can be extracted.

I long to have such a memorial of every being dear to me in the world. It is not merely the likeness which is precious in such cases but the association and the sense of nearness involved in the thing... the fact of the very shadow of the person lying there fixed forever - It is the very sanctification of portraits I think and it is not at all monstrous in me to say, what my brothers cry out against so vehemently, that I would rather have such a memorial of one I dearly loved, than the noblest artist's work ever produced. - Elizabeth Barrett (1843, letter to Mary Russell Mitford) [20.p.183]

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

John Berger declared: 'A radial system has to be constructed around the photograph so that it may be seen in terms which are simultaneously personal, political, economic, dramatic, everyday and historic' [5.p.60.]

Towards this end I set out to define a context in which to discuss Matt Mahurin's photographs. This context building consisted of:

1. Defining how the viewer approaches a photograph.
2. Stating how the physical presentation of photographs can dictate the interpretation of them.
3. Discussion of how an individual's viewing 'pattern' or 'formation' is developed.

The notion of photographic 'truth' then needed discussion in order to clarify the difficulties in 'truthful' photography. I discussed:

1. The development of public photography and its role in propogating an 'official' viewpoint.
2. How public photography from its inception has thoughtlessly stampeded towards obtaining shocking imagery.
3. How these shocking images ultimately shock us, numb us and lead to charity and self-appeasement in the form of short-term 'help' while simultaneously de-politicising our reactions.

Moving on I pointed out how, from the times of genre painting up to today, truly subversive imagery has been dodged by the controllers of public images. The idea of pho-

tographs as evidence towards historical judgement and progression on man's part was then discussed followed by an alternative approach to photography and the use of photographs taken.

All of this context building was a way of illustrating the contradictions and difficulties involved in the taking and presentations of photographs. John Berger's proposal for a more truthful method of photographic taking and presentation shows that the problems are not insurmountable but need very careful navigation.

Having established this context, I discussed twelve of Matt Mahurin's photographs. A point in their favour was their lack of shock tactics, in environments in which it would have been relatively easy to use shock. Mahurin avoided images which would alienate the viewer and switch him or her off from the subjects completely. His images are seductive. I decoded the images with regard to their content in order to clarify some themes, intentions and results on the part of Mahurin.

The question of the photograph's formal qualities in relation to the content arose. My main concern was with understanding why his images look and feel the way they do. An analysis of the aesthetic itself was superfluous as it is not a new approach visually.

In discussing his two self-acknowledged influences, Steichen and Curtis, I felt the importance of his style lay deeper than mere homage to or plagiarism of his predecessors. Ideas put forward by Walter Benjamin formed the basis of my understanding of why his images are seductive. Mahurin's work, I found, bears resemblance to photographic work from the time that the cult value of the images was receding to be replaced by the exhibition or ownership of the image. His work refers to the time when people could connect directly with images in a visceral manner. He plays on the sense of involvement when viewing children in family photographs and he links his work to early photographic portraiture with all its encumbent pathos, remembrance and melancholy. In this way Matt Mahurin's work draws viewers back into situations which they have seen again and again in a shocking manner and presents them with seductive, silent photo-

graphs which allow breathing space and thinking space. His pensive approach induces a closer approximation of real understanding than most photographs we have seen in documentary photography. Matt Mahurin has an original approach to what Susan Sontag calls '...the confusion about truth and beauty underlying the photographic enterprise' - Susan Sontag [20.p.112].

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ILLUSTRATIONS TO ACCOMPANY

THE CULT OF REMEMBRANCE

A DISCUSSION OF THE WORK OF MATT MAHURIN

BY FEARGAL FITZPATRICK

MARCH 1990



Fig. 1.
Nicaragua 1987



Fig. 2.
Paris 1988



Fig. 3.
Nicaragua 1987



Fig. 4.
Nicaragua 1987



Fig. 5.
Haiti 1988



Fig. 6.
Paris 1988



Fig. 7.
Paris 1984



Fig. 8.
Nicaragua 1987

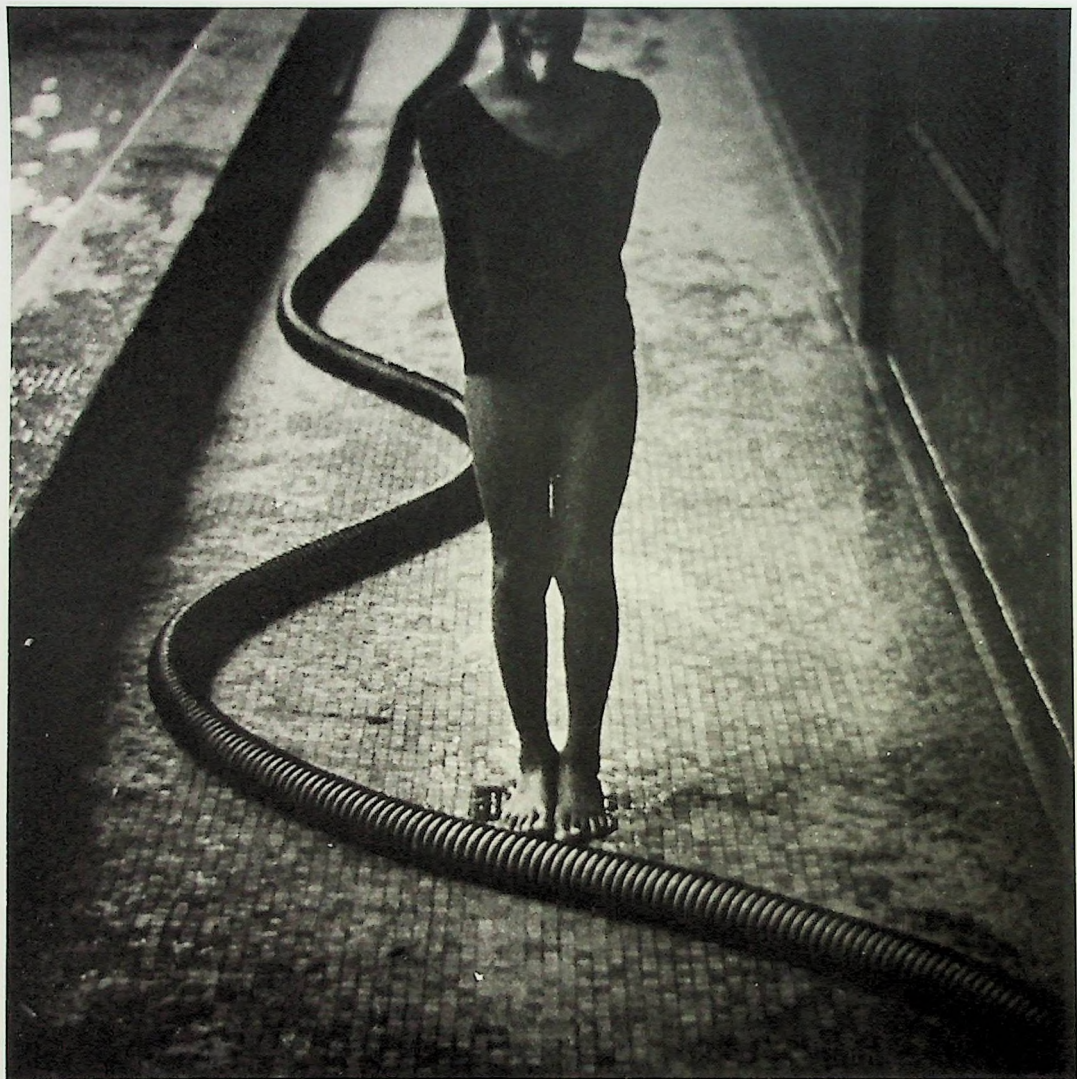


Fig. 9.
Harlem 1988



Fig. 10.
Texas Prison 1985

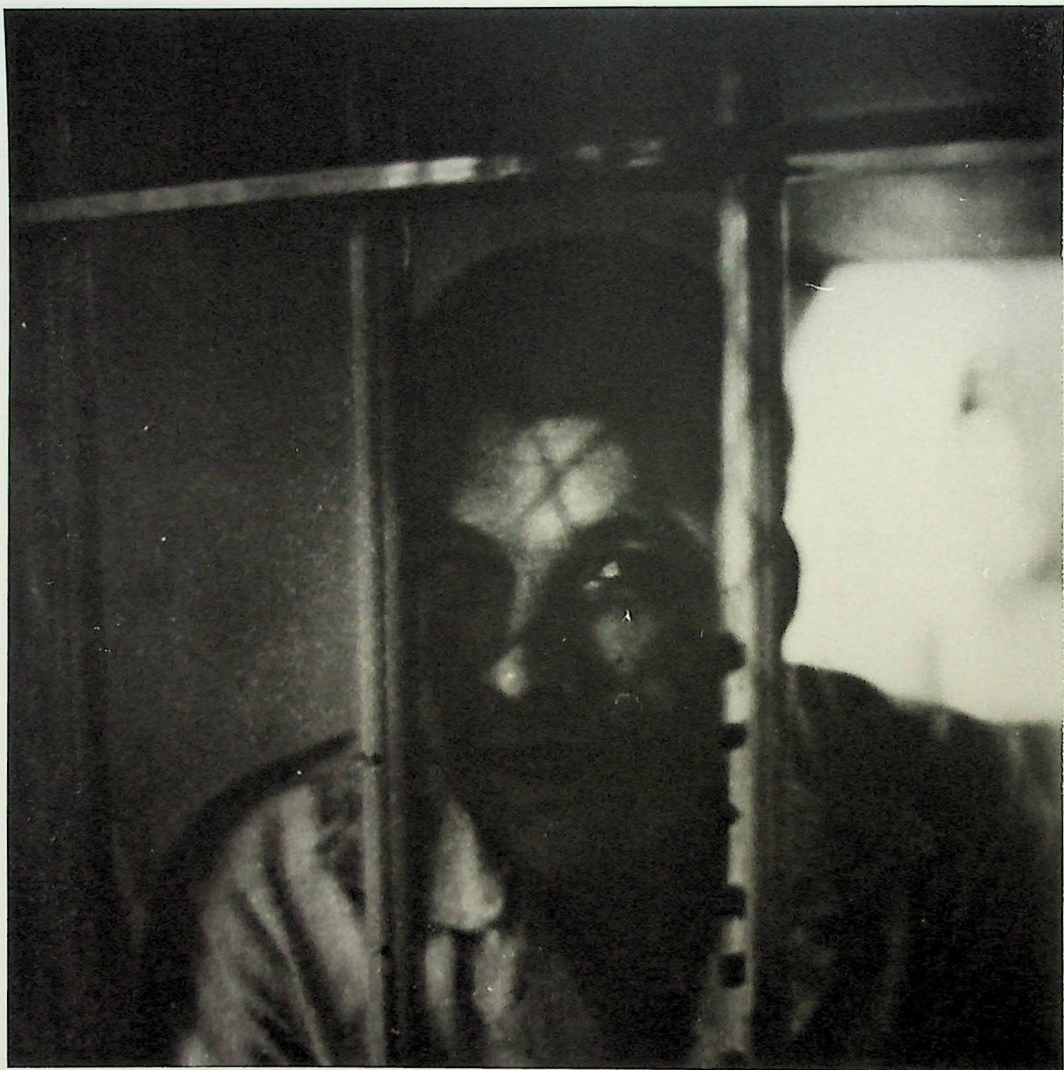


Fig. 11.
Texas Prison 1985

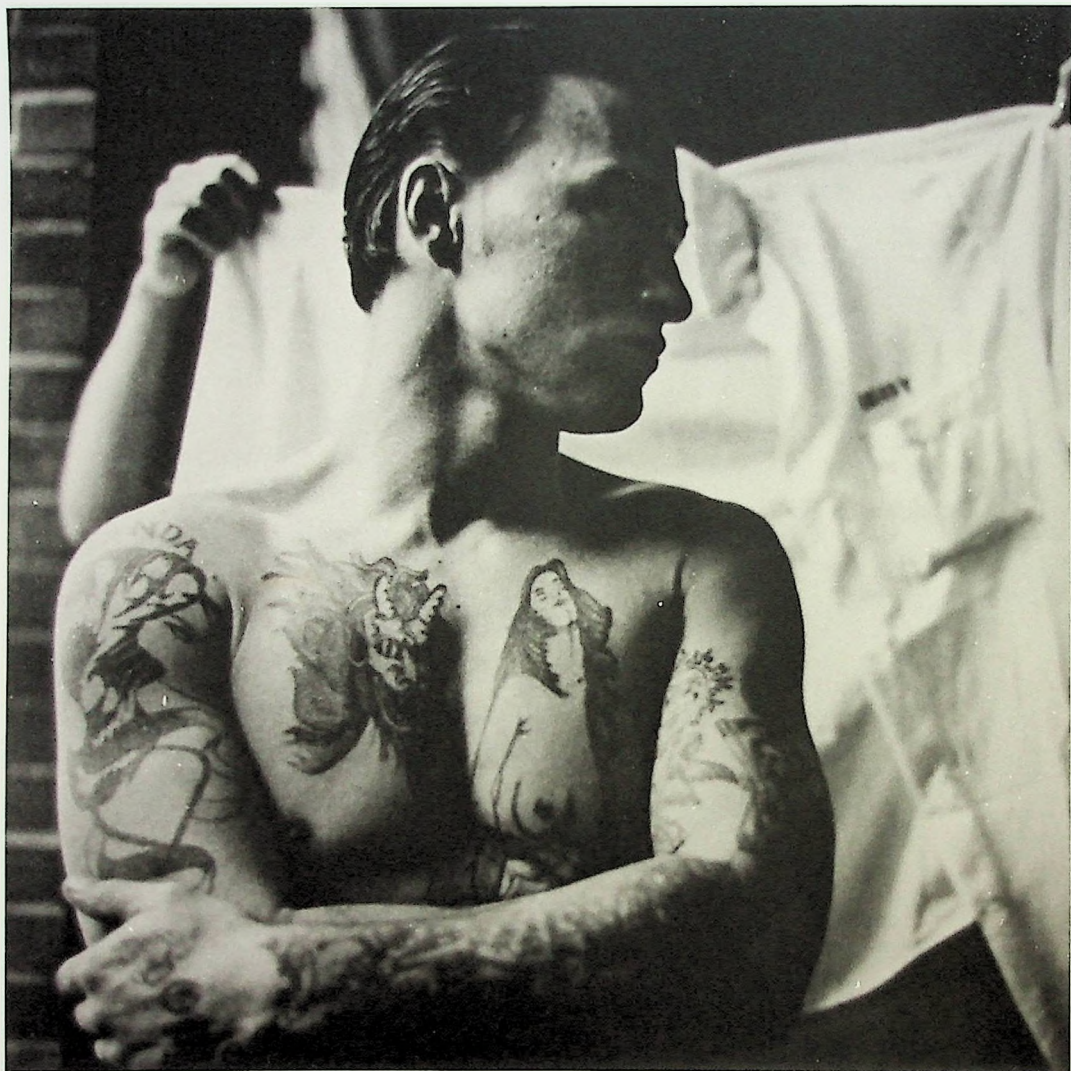


Fig. 12.
Texas Prison 1985



Fig. 13.
Offering the buffalo skull - Mandan 1908
[9. p. 125]



Fig. 14.
Clayoquot woman in Cedar bark hat 1915
[9. p. 169]



Fig. 15.
Agnes E. Meyer, New York 1910.
[21. p. 59]

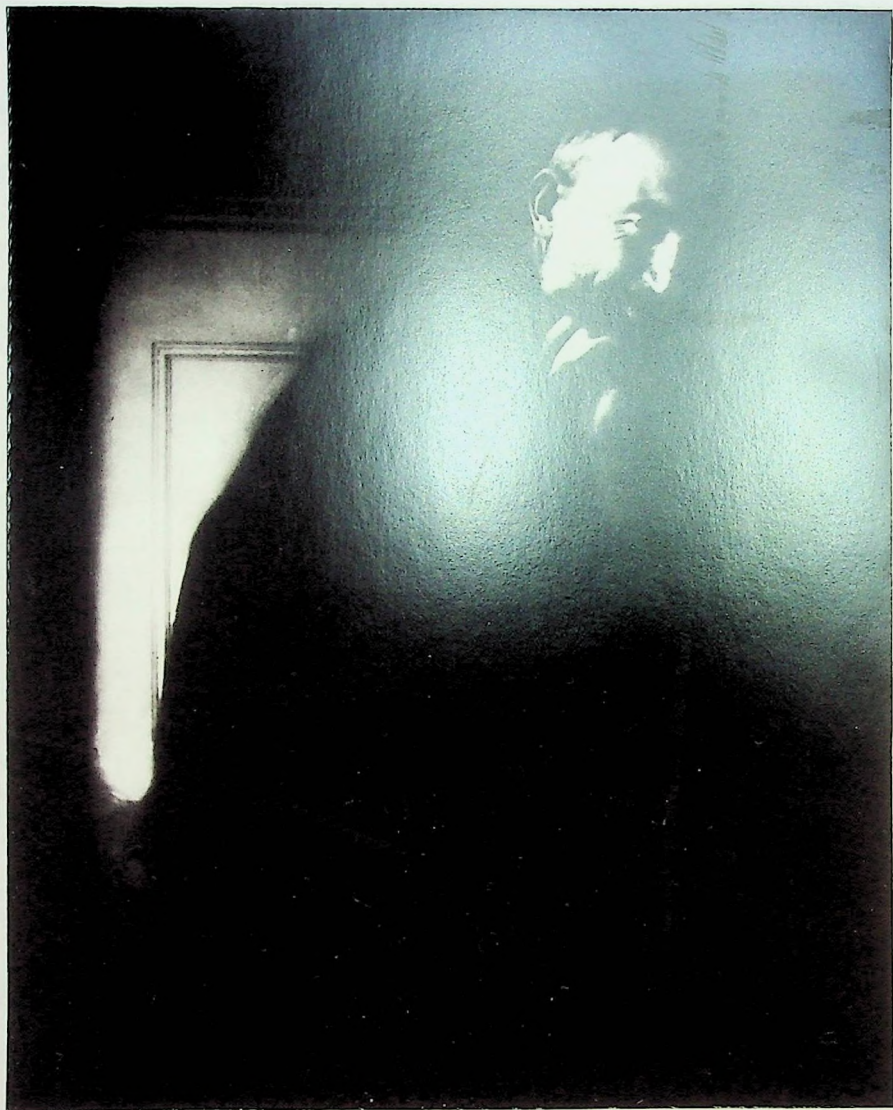


Fig. 16.
George Bernard Shaw, London 1907.
[21. p. 77.]