

## WAYS OF TELLING: PHOTOGRAPHY & NARRATIVE

What is narrative? According to the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary*, it is “the practice or act of narrating; something to narrate”. Note that “practice”, reminding us that narrative requires both a subject and an object: there is somebody who talks and somebody who listens, somebody who relates and somebody receiving the relation. Narrative is not just the story or text being narrated, but also the act, or ceremony, of narration. The ritual phrases “Once upon a time...” and “Here beginneth the Lesson...” warn the listener that the narrative which is to follow is of a particular kind, different from everyday exchanges. Once we concede that there can be no narrative without a narrator, personal style becomes a factor: a story-telling grandmother and the evangelist are characterised by radically different voices. Indeed, it is style which usually first lets the audience know what sort of narrative is to ensue.

“Even when the content of a narrative is drawn from the world”, notes Lucy Souter, “the mode of presentation must differ perceptibly, if only slightly, from a pure imitation of real world events”.<sup>1</sup> Narrative differs from mere representation: instead of mirroring or reproducing reality, it filters it through particular linguistic or visual codes or conventions. Visual codes are no rarer or less explicit than linguistic codes: Byzantine icons are one kind of visual convention, as are political cartoons and cowboy films. In all three cases, as long as he is familiar with the relevant codes, a single glance is usually sufficient for the observer to understand what he is seeing and the context in which it should be interpreted, with the possible exception of parodies or deliberate distortions of convention. It would take no time, for instance, for a film buff to tell whether the unfamiliar film he was about to see had been directed by Tarkovsky or by Woody Allen.

Film has now been enshrined as the dominant pictorial narrative form of our time, usually by way of contrast with still photography, which is widely though falsely assumed to be incapable of producing anything other than static records of objects and situations. This development, however, was far from inevitable, as witness the serial chronophotographic experiments of Etienne-Jules Marey and Eadweard Muybridge in the 1860s, well before the invention of the cinema. As Benoît Peeters remarks, “led by artists of the first stature, these two initiatives might have opened a promising future to narrative photography. Strangely enough, if they led to anything, it was to the cinema...”.<sup>2</sup> Muybridge himself moved in this direction with his invention, in 1880, of the *zoogyroscope*, which projected images of horses and other animals in motion. In the end, however, “no sooner was the cinema invented, than most photographers seem to have turned away from these serial researches, as though they had been nothing more than a trial, an early approach to the new medium. Barely exploiting the available sequential possibilities, photography increasingly privileged the single image. [...] It is in any case astonishing to realise the extent to which an idealist photographer like Cartier-Bresson associates the success of an image to the unique and unrepeatable character of the instant”.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless photography, though for a long time it mostly went in other directions, never gave up the attempt to narrate. To begin with, it is self-evident that every photograph contains at least some narrative elements, if only those which pertain to the inevitable choices made by the photographer at the moment of creation. Beyond this, the elements which constitute a photograph and the relation between them conform to the rules of a language derived, at the very least, from the medium’s nature. The question is whether the mere existence of this language justifies the claim that every photographic image thereby has narrative content. For many semiologists, such as Marc-Emmanuel Mélon, the answer is no:

“Even though language is at work in a photograph by Cartier-Bresson, it does not follow that the photograph is telling a story. Todorov reminds us that in order for there to be a ‘narrative’ and not simply the ‘description of a state’, there must occur some event, some action, the passage from one state to another, change, difference”.<sup>4</sup> Christian Metz is even more categorical: “photography”, he claims, “never intended to tell stories. [...] An individual photograph is obviously incapable of narrating anything! And yet by what strange corollary is it the case that two juxtaposed photographs should be forced to relate something? To pass from one to two images is to pass from the image to language”.<sup>5</sup>

It should be obvious that the presence of primitive narrative elements in a photograph does not automatically bestow upon it a narrative character, or at least not to any significant degree. On the other hand, Metz’s diktat is far too sweeping, since it is a fact that certain individual photographs, for the most part staged, have an extraordinarily high narrative content. His point about the passage from image to language is, however, well taken, and does indeed represent the basis of most photographic narratives.

\*\*\*\*\*

The most widespread form of photographic narrative has probably been the documentary photo essay, a genre associated with the rise of pre-war mass-market picture magazines. Veteran photojournalist and picture editor Fred Ritchin gives a useful definition of the photo essay: “a grouping of photographs, usually published with text, that, like its written equivalent, attempts to get at the essence of a person, place or event”.<sup>6</sup> According to Ian Jeffrey, the earliest photo essays in the sense of “sets of interrelated pictures” appeared in 1928 in the German magazines *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* and *Münchner Illustrierte Zeitung*, which published the work of Felix Man and Erich Salomon.<sup>7</sup> They were followed by *Vu* in France, *Weekly Illustrated* and *Picture Post* in Britain, and, in 1936, by *Life* in the United States. War, beginning with the Spanish civil war, gave a big boost to the magazine market in general and to ambitious young photojournalists in particular, and the twenty-six images by Robert Capa which *Picture Post* published in 1938 under the strident headline *This is War!* represented a significant expansion of the photo essay’s scope.

The subsequent world war, with the large and mostly literate populations of the countries involved eager for news and information, provided a further impetus to photojournalism; a relatively new twist to the conflict was the open warfare practiced against civilians, a development recorded by, amongst others, **George Rodger’s** photographs of the London blitz. Rodger’s images are dramatic, but they are particularly affecting for the incidental detail they reveal. More perhaps than by other incidents depicted in his images, we are struck by the instructions hastily scrawled in chalk on the wall of a battered building: “Enquiries re. casualties on top floor. Re. deaths on first floor”.

The two decades following the end of the war represent the glory days of the photo essay in the popular press, culminating in the humanism of W. Eugene Smith’s essays for *Life*, including such classics as *Country Doctor* (1948), *Spanish Village* (1951) and *Albert Schweitzer* (1954). However, Smith came up against the limitations of the genre with his monumental but ultimately over-ambitious photo essay on Pittsburgh, for which he shot some 11,000 frames for Magnum in 1955 without ever finding a satisfactory way of presenting the material. Though four years later, *Photography Annual* published 88 of the images spread over 37 pages, Smith regarded this as a failure, and the essay remains incomplete.

Confidence in the popular press photo essay suffered during the cold war years. In contrast to most European magazines, whose owners and staff at the time tended to

subscribe to progressive or at least liberal political ideals, the American publishers behind *Life* and *Look* were firmly conservative in outlook and worked hard at promoting a largely utopian view of American society both at home and abroad. A significant part in this effort was played by carefully selected photo essays which waxed enthusiastic about the American way of life, while carefully avoiding mention of anything which might spoil the picture. "The American way of life pictures and photoessays made for *Life*, *Look* and the USIA in the 1940s and 1950s", noted James Guimond, "are notable for their homogeneity: virtually everyone in them is white, middle class, and a member of a small nuclear family. [...] These families closely resembled the people who had appeared in advertisements since the 1920s, the families in children's elementary school textbooks..."<sup>8</sup> The resemblance to advertising imagery was deliberate, as was enthusiastic support for the American economy: "the flamboyantly optimistic advertising and photoessays of the 1940s and 1950s expressed a desire to replace an excessively pessimistic viewpoint of the American economy with a more 'realistic' and optimistic one. It must be pointed out, however, that this impulse was not disinterested: increased advertising would be needed to increase consumption, and this was clearly very much in the interest of advertising agencies, editors, and publishers..."<sup>9</sup>

The inevitable reaction, when it came, resulted in a migration of the serious photo essay from large-circulation magazines to other methods of presentation, primarily photographic books. Important photo essays which adopted a critical stance towards American society and were first published in book form include Robert Frank's *The Americans* (1968) and William Klein's *Life is Good and Good for You in New York* (1956), while later, Philip Jones Griffith's *Vietnam Inc.* (1971) was a brilliant attack on the immorality and mismanagement of the war in SE Asia by the military-industrial complex. The same principle of "the book as witness", to adopt Colin Westerbeck's term, had been adopted by Don McCullin with his highly politicised essay *Beirut: A City in Crisis* (1970). Since that time, a steady stream of photo essays in book form have borne testimony to different aspects of the world and its inhabitants.

In Greece, the photo essay in the sense of an in-depth investigation of a specific subject emerged relatively late. Early examples include Voula Papaioannou's record of the post-war reconstruction, though her photographs were usually published as individual images; **Dimitri Charisiadis'** observation of the Epidaurus Festival from 1954 to 1966, now brought together for the first time; and Kostas Balafas' coverage of the Acheloos Dam construction project, which only recently came to light. The pioneers of the New Greek Photography movement produced some important photo essays, but market conditions in the seventies and eighties rarely allowed for their undivided publication;<sup>10</sup> significant bodies of work included Yiorgos Depollas' and Nikos Panayiotopoulos' accounts of Leros psychiatric asylum, John Demos' *Panigiria*, Nikos Markou's *Gasworks* and Eleni Malkigoura's *Omonia Square*. Among recent examples of photo essays which achieved book form one might single out Kostas Sakelariou's *The Last Greeks of Constantinople* (1995), Yiorgos Katsangelos' *Religious Matters* (1997) and Paris Petridis' *Wedding Album* (2002).<sup>11</sup> Today, the emergence of young Greek photojournalists with international reputations has given rise to photo essays with a much wider range of subjects; one such is Yiannis Kondos' *The Photographers of Kabul*, which investigates a 21<sup>st</sup> century society until recently intent on banning almost every aspect of photography.

In the past, magazines such as *Life* might devote substantial sums to the funding of photographic expeditions to the ends of the earth, but those times are long gone. The new patrons of costly photographic activities (and the subsequent publications) are now large international companies, though often they require some link between the project being sponsored and their own commercial activities. Such a connection exists, for instance,

between the Italian gas company Italgaz and the extensive photo essay produced by film director **Giuseppe Tornatore** on the Siberian city of Novij Urengoi and its inhabitants; a planned city on the edge of the Arctic Circle, its significance lies in the fact that it sits above Russia's richest deposits of natural gas.

Inspired by photojournalism, classic photo essays such as those of Rodger or of Tornatore are based on the accumulation of characteristic images which work together like the tesserae of a mosaic to form the 'larger picture'. This is the technique traditionally adopted by documentary photography, with its emphasis on fragments of insight through which understanding is constructed. This particular photographic discourse depends to large extent on easily recognisable symbols, with more obscure or ambiguous readings rejected for reasons of clarity. Conventional photographic depictions of the Ulster troubles, for instance, would normally include variations on the following subjects: a British Army patrol making its way, gun in hand, through an indifferent crowd; an IRA honour guard surrounding a coffin; and an Orange Lodge parade crossing a Catholic neighbourhood.

There is, however, another, more indirect way in which a photo essay can confront narrative, in particular the peculiarly charged narrative which attempts to describe political situations. It is based, not on the simple depiction of events, but on a more subtle reading: on a reading of place by the photographer, and on a reading of the resultant images by the viewer. As such, it calls for active participation on the part of the consumer, something which makes it unsuitable for mass consumption; in practice, examples of this approach are usually either exhibited, or published in the form of monographs. An influential example of the genre was *Troubled Land*, photographed by **Paul Graham** in Northern Island between 1984 and 1986. At first sight, the thirty-odd large colour prints have nothing political about them, seemingly consisting of at times more hard-edged, at times more lyrical semi-urban landscapes. A more careful examination starts revealing the signs of tribal conflict scattered about these apparently innocent landscapes: a small Union Jack flying from the top of tree in a field, the coded colours on curbstones, the security walls dividing a distant townscape. According to Paul Bonaventura, "*Troubled Land* engages with its subject surreptitiously. The social, political and cultural tensions that Graham exposes appear in the middle-distance or off to one side of the frame. The viewer is made to work to find the point at which townscape or landscape come together with the fallout from the Troubles, the locus at which the complex layers of meaning converge."<sup>12</sup>

A similar strategy, that of a seemingly neutral reading of a politically charged landscape, was followed by **Paul Seawright** in Afghanistan, where he perceptively and succinctly photographed the after-effects of the recent conflict: "[These] open, unvarnished statements of fact ought to suggest candour and guilelessness, but in fact they have precisely the opposite effect: surely, one feels, there is something hidden here after all - beyond that ridge, under that slope, at the far edge of the horizon. The paradox of Afghan landscape, successfully captured by Seawright, is that it always seems to be concealing something. Many of his images are, precisely, examples of the way simple objects suddenly loom, portentous and solitary, out of an otherwise empty landscape. Given the context of a war-ravaged country, these signs are inevitably read in reference to conflict: mines scattered in the sand like raisins in a cake, unidentified mounds too much like shallow graves to be anything else, the shattered stumps of what was once a small grove of trees, the remains of a mud and brick structure, a battered sign pointing towards Mazar-i-Sharif, a perimeter fence of barbed wire and military meccano, scattered shell cases."<sup>13</sup>

Closer to home, **Christos Kalos** photographed the urban landscape of Thessaloniki as it appeared on the nights of 19-21 June 2003, when the entire town centre was seemingly

wrapped in corrugated steel for fear of anti-globalisation demonstrations during the meeting of European heads of state. He came back with bizarre, surrealist images of a dystopic future straight out of *Blade Runner*: “at night there was almost nobody out, corrugated steel all around us, everything wrapped up like a parcel, a sense of menace, an uneasy silence presaging everything that was to take place”.<sup>14</sup>

\*\*\*\*\*

Shooting a photo essay presupposes a certain familiarity with the subject on the photographer’s part – a familiarity which may pre-exist, or which might be the result of research undertaken specifically for the purpose. Both approaches have their advantages; whereas a photographer working in a familiar environment and on a subject of personal interest is clearly more likely to have access to details, situations and conjunctions inaccessible to the outsider, the latter benefits from seeing everything with a fresh and unprejudiced eye.

Virtually the whole of **Nan Goldin’s** oeuvre falls into the first category, being effectively a record of her life and that of her bohemian friends, some of it extremely personal. The often melodramatic aspect of her photographs can lead to the suspicion that they may have been partly staged, something she explicitly repudiates: “The thing about my work is, nothing is prearranged, prethought, premeditated. In no way was I directing the pictures; they’re just fragments of life as it was being lived. There was no staging. When you set up pictures you’re not at any risk. Reality involves chance and risk and diving for pearls.”<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, there is a distinctly theatrical air to the images which make up her essay on the teenage model James King, who at the time of the shoot was a regular heroin user – perhaps because the photographs were taken specifically for publication in the *NY Times Magazine*, when heroin chic was the coming thing in the fashion and advertising worlds.

**Johanna Weber’s** *Alien Signs* are the result of a different kind of familiarity. Her work consists of compound photographic grids illustrating those areas of central Athens (mostly the neighbourhoods south of Omonia Square) which have in recent years become the home of immigrant and refugee communities from Eastern Europe, Asia and Africa. Weber does not show not the people themselves, but instead the now ubiquitous signs, formal and informal, of their presence amongst us, as well as the network of social structures which provides these communities with essential services: restaurants, cafes, steam baths, travel agents offering cheap fares to the Middle and Far East, Arabic-language posters, Bollywood videos and spices from Taiwan.

Conversely, **Kai-Olaf Hesse’s** *Topography of Titanic* is the result of an investigation by the German photographer into an area previously completely unfamiliar to him, namely the once mighty Harland & Wolf shipyards in Belfast. Originally among the largest in the empire, they were built in 1862 upon a 75-hectare artificial island in the Lagan estuary. It was from here that the *Titanic* sailed in 1912 on her fatal maiden voyage, bequeathing the city of her birth a rich legacy of myth and tradition, now subsumed in collective memory. Hesse’s images explore these memories, now that the shipyard’s great days are past and the area is slated to become “one of the largest waterfront developments in Europe”.

It was precisely the sensation of finding himself a stranger in a strange land which became the inspiration for *Citizens of Novorossisk*, **Pericles Boutos’** unusual photographic essay. Each image consists of two complementary portraits, one of an inhabitant of this Russian port, and the other of the photographer himself, taken at his request by the subject of the first portrait. “After having lived in the port of Novorossisk for about a year in an official

capacity as Consul General of Greece for South Russia”, writes Boutos, “I realised that I had no understanding of the life of the people in the city, nor did I have any contact with them. [...] Doing cityscapes or simply taking portraits of the people of Novorossisk did not seem enough. I felt I had to document encounters rather than author images, and in the process inscribe my own self in the city’s environment.”<sup>16</sup>

Entitled *L’Europe a table*, **Anne Testut**’s investigation of European dining idiosyncrasies took her the length and breadth of the continent over a period of many months. The technique followed was invariable: newly arrived in a city or region, she would get to know some of the inhabitants before asking permission of her new acquaintances to photograph them during the course of an ordinary family meal. In the published monograph, each image is accompanied by a page of text in which Testut, in her own words, records some information about the person or the people she has photographed. The project, surprisingly perhaps, turns out to have a peculiar fascination of its own, with the photographs taking on some of the gossipy character of a family album. The differences between countries and individuals become a matter of enormous interest, and one turns from one image to the other to see who dines in splendour and who eats on the run, who drinks wine and who drinks milk, who watches television during a meal and who gazes at their cat instead. One, admittedly unscientific, conclusion of this survey appears to confirm deeply rooted European prejudice: the nastiest meals by far as those being consumed by the British and the Irish.

\*\*\*\*\*

If the many varieties of photographic essay represent one aspect of photographic narrative, that of *testimony*, another and equally rich aspect is that of *invention* – that is to say, of narratives based on staged or constructed photographs. The simplest and most obvious form of staged photographic narrative consists of that universally despised example of vernacular photography known as the **photo romance**, a genre which became a mainstay of the European popular periodical press, particularly women’s magazines, during the 1950s and 1960s. Photo romances (or *photo stories* as they were sometimes called) were in effect comic strips based on photographs rather than drawings; the staged photographic sequences were shot using professional actors, with dialogue and other plot detail overlaid in the course of paste-up. Publication was serial, usually over three full pages and several issues of a magazine. Photo romances first appeared in Italy in 1947, where they were known as *fotoromanzi*, and spread rapidly through the Mediterranean countries of Europe and particularly France, from where many series would later be imported to Greece and elsewhere.

The plots usually consisted of tear-drenched family dramas, in effect the precursors of television soap opera, as witness the definition of the French term *roman-photo*: “a sentimental narration in the form of photographic vignettes”. There were also darker melodramas with titles like *Hearts in the Storm* and *Betrayed Loves*, relatively rare thrillers (*The Adventures of the Legendary Agent SZ-4 Zak Douglas*) and even rarer comedies (*Bikini Girls*). Photo romances mimicked not only the structure but even at times the form of film; the first panel of the opening page usually displayed credits for the leading actors, the scriptwriter and the director as well as the title of the series. Some Greek examples go one better: *Each Day, A Life* commemorates not only its six stars, but a writer, a director, a photographer and a ‘designer’ (presumably the man responsible for layout).

Some Greek photo romances are derived directly from local films, usually those produced by Finos-Films studios, such as *Concerto for Machineguns*, a wartime drama starring

Jenny Karezi, and *The Bait*, a sentimental comedy starring Aliko Vouyiouklaki, Greece's answer to Brigitte Bardot. In these cases the images are printed directly from individual film frames rather than photographed to order, as the static frame and persistent camera angles make clear. The photographers of original photo romances, on the other hand, constantly vary distance and camera angle, with a distinct weakness for shooting from well below eye level, while page layout is also much more fluid. On balance, attempts at transferring real films onto the page in the form of hybrid photo romances seem stilted and wordy, whereas authentic examples of the genre, though regarded today as a form of popular kitsch, have an undoubted crude vivacity.

After experiencing a period of great popularity and substantial sales, European photo romances as an object of popular consumption went into irreversible decline during the 1970s, vanishing completely by the next decade; the genre survives in a few third world countries. Paradoxically, perhaps, they underwent a kind of resurrection in the radically different context of French 'high' culture, which resulted in the production of a few experimental photo romances, among them Marie-Francoise Plissart's *Droit de regards* (1985), which came accompanied by a thirty-page essay by Derrida, and Alain Robbe-Grillet's three 'cine-romans' based on his films (and on Resnais' *Last Year in Marienbad*). Today, as a brief search of the internet will confirm, photo romance maintains its grip on life as a D.I.Y. genre in two fields of strictly minority interest, namely pornography and school photographic education.

An early but largely unfamiliar example of Greek staged photography is that of the war artist **Yiorgos Prokopiou**, who accompanied the Greek army on operations in Asia Minor in 1919 and in Albania in 1940.<sup>17</sup> The paintings he produced are notable for their realism and high level of detail, something he ensured by staging and photographing his subjects. A competent and highly experienced photographer (a very few, unfortunately, of the glass negative plates he took on an Abyssinian journey in 1904 have survived), he maintained a fully equipped darkroom in Smyrna prior to the expulsion of the Greek population; he was also one of the first war cinematographers, shooting many thousand feet of film during the Asia Minor campaign.

The photographs Prokopiou took to serve as a basis for his paintings were very carefully staged; the photograph of the officer with a bandaged hand about to lead his men into a bayonet charge, for instance, exists in at least four variants, all slightly different. One shows five soldiers clustered around the officer, in the second the five soldiers have become four and all are now positioned behind the officer, in a third one of the soldiers has exchanged his helmet for a forage cap, and so on. Despite the precise and careful staging, the photographs might at first sight be mistaken for authentic action shots – a compliment to Prokopiou's directorial abilities – if they weren't in the end betrayed by their flawless and unnatural clarity. The excessive perfection of the groupings, with everyone placed just so, is precisely what gives these photographs a strong narrative quality; a genuine photograph of an infantry squad about to go into action would undoubtedly be 'truer' and carry a heavier emotional charge, but would probably lack the narrative clarity of the staged image.

**Wendy McMurdo** does not simply stage her photographs, she also manipulates them digitally, adding or removing elements, at times obviously and at others imperceptibly. Her subject is children, usually on their own, occasionally accompanied by friends or cybernetic doublegangers. She has recently turned to photographing in natural history museums; in these images, the children are alone, accompanied only by unnaturally still members of the animal kingdom staring at them out of glass display cases. As Claire Doherty notes, "McMurdo reduces context to signifying elements. [...] the museum is emptied out of school bags, school

mates and labels. The child is isolated and illuminated and emerges as the central, motivating force of the works.”<sup>18</sup> This isolation is even more dramatically marked in the series of images which depict children playing musical instruments – except that the actual instruments have been removed, and the children, intently and with eyes shut, are playing the empty air.

The staged, digitised diversions of Peking artist **Qingsong Wang** are equally sophisticated but quite different in tone. His images are wryly sarcastic comments on the seemingly invincible penetration of western consumer culture into a contemporary China apparently delighted to welcome Coca Cola and McDonalds with open arms, in defiance of both recent Marxist past and pre-revolutionary Confucianism. In *Look Up! Look Up!*, Wang, surrounded by young women wearing near-parodic versions of western leisure clothing, reaches out with religious yearning towards the epiphany of an oversized Coke bottle descending from the skies. Meanwhile, each of the *Requesting Buddha*'s ten hands proffers some consumer knick-knack ranging from a cell phone to a CD; an eleventh hand rising up vertically waves the red flag of the People's Republic of China, though without particular emphasis.

**Victor Burgin**'s classic sequence *US 77* is another and earlier example of a politicised protest against American consumer culture. According to the artist, “the graphic conventions governing [the photographs'] appearance derive from illustrated magazines and advertising. In terms of content, the work is built around the themes of power, identity, sexuality.” Burgin employs deliberately spare means of representation, typically combinations of text and black and white photography, since he firmly rejects anything which tends to aestheticise photography as what he calls “a sort of trap for the eye”; his intention, on the contrary, is to stress “the image not as illusions but as text, to be read”.<sup>19</sup> The texts which accompany his photographs work in different ways, sometimes subverting the image, sometimes proffering alternative readings, but always leading the viewer in the direction of an ironic interpretation – an interpretation which the image on its own may well not have provoked.

With the exhaustion of post-modernism as source of artistic inspiration, more and more photographers, at first in the USA and Britain, began turning towards constructed imagery – more precisely, towards a strange hybrid in which staged photography mimics the appearance and rhetoric of documentary. Though with a distinct narrative content, work produced in this idiom does not have anything which could be called a plot; rather, it hints at the existence of a plot which viewers, assuming they are familiar with the relevant narrative convention, can develop in their own imaginations. As Lucy Souter remarks, “photographs contain essential seeds of narratives that can never come to fruition except in the imagination”.<sup>20</sup> **Gregory Crewdson** is a photographer who has been particularly influential in this area, not least because of his role in Yale's Master of Fine Arts program. The untitled photographs he took towards the end of the eighties are at first sight straightforward images of a typical middle-class American suburb, but they are shot through by a sense of anxiety rather like that which pervades David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*. Ten years later, Crewdson returned to a similar locale to shoot a series of much more elaborate staged images, this time owing their inspiration more to Spielberg and to science fiction.

Referring to the work of Philip-Lorca diCorcia, another photographer who operates discreetly in the no-man's-land between documentary and invention, Peter Galassi remarked that “all [his] pictures are stage-managed, in degrees ranging from the trivial to the elaborate. What makes diCorcia's work powerful (and original) is that the contaminant of fiction, instead of causing us to reject the picture as false, draws us further into its drama. [...] Between the implied sincerity of the documentary idiom and the unapologetic fictions of popular culture, Frey and diCorcia, following different routes, discovered a twilight zone where the



unexploded bomb of psychological narrative incessantly ticks.”<sup>21</sup> **Vassilis Polychronakis’** latest work, a development of the urban landscapes he showed in Kythera in October 2002 and at the Photography Centre of Athens in March 2003, is very much in this idiom: to the once empty building sites and half-finished concrete shells have now been added enigmatic figures, some closer and some more distant, who stand or sit, expressionless, in the midst of these amorphous architectural latencies.

**Hannah Starkey** became known for her large colour prints of women and girls in public interiors such as cafes – staged photographs which hint at complex psychological scenarios, without ever reaching any consummation. As has been the case with Goldin’s, her work has often been appropriated by the voracious fashion photography industry, with its insistence upon always appearing to be at the cutting edge of culture. Commenting on the sequence Starkey shot for *Vogue Hommes* in 1998, Val Williams writes that it “revolves around a night-time adventure in the east London cityscape. Invoking the isolated romance of youthful wanderings in an urban spaced, people wait and look, exchange glances, and time is fluid.”<sup>22</sup> The problem here, as indeed with this idiom in general, is the ever-present threat of a slide into portentousness, a threat exacerbated by fashion’s generally breathless and over-excited sense of its own importance.

The dreamlike triptychs of **Stelios Efstathopoulos’** strange series *Someone Knocking at the Door* owe nothing to digital manipulation and everything to old-fashioned technical ingenuity. Paying homage to that archetypal manifestation of Greek popular narrative, the adventures of the hunchback shadow-puppet Karagiozis, Efstathopoulos replaced the shadow-play’s white screen with colour photos printed on translucent film; these in turn became the screens of a home-made *camera obscura* upon which other scenes were projected. It is worth noting that the title of the work, as well as the titles of individual triptychs (“The Sly Typist”, “The Great Serpent”, “Topsy Turvy”, “Forty Less One”) are all titles of published dramas starring the inimitable Karagiozis. Though there is no perceptible connection between the plots of the shadow plays and Efstathopoulos’ images, the latter give an uncanny sense of peering into a distorted but not wholly unfamiliar parallel world.

The work of Cindy Sherman is a universally acknowledged milestone in the area of photographic narrative; her earliest and perhaps finest work was *Untitled Film Stills*, in which the photographer acted out a wide variety of roles as the star in a series of black and white images representing imaginary but utterly convincing movies. **Nicoletta Zissi’s** sequence *Lady Seeks...*, this young artist’s first major exhibited work, is no less impressive: in a series of 50 Polaroids, Zissi impersonates as many women who have placed matrimonial lonely hearts advertisements in Greek newspapers.<sup>23</sup> The actual texts of these (authentic) advertisements accompany the photos, and provide the inspiration for the avatar adopted in each case by Zissi – sober or kittenish, youthful or mature, depending on the description and on the message the advertiser hopes to project. As she perceptively comments, “the nature of these texts balances precariously between advertising trick and anguished appeal”. The space available for advertising purpose is extremely restricted, as restricted as the language employed; the result, simultaneously funny and sad, is a docile acceptance of stereotyped descriptions, stereotyped images, and, in effect, of stereotyped responses to human beings.

\*\*\*\*\*

Somewhere between the poles of testimony and invention lies the separate class of personal narrative by which artists sometimes attempt to make sense (or art) out of their past and present circumstances. Such narratives may be based on regular if conventional depictions of

one's immediate social environment, like that accumulated by amateur photographer **Yiorgos Vafiadakis** between 1924 and 1938; the results survive in 24 carefully crafted and home-made albums now in the Greek Literary & Historical Archive (ELIA). A more structured approach is that **Stratos Kalafatis**, whose extended sequence *insolation* records, almost day by day, the chronicle of a four-year residence with his family on the northern Aegean island of Skopelos. Smaller, subordinate sequences within the at first sight chaotic succession of images reflect some of the photographer's passing interests (bathers, flowers, seascapes, portraits, skyscapes), but the work always returns to its essential iconic and conceptual concern, which is that of the family – spouse, children, pets, home – and the passage of seasons. As is the case with all truly engrossing journals, what remains with the viewer is the sweep of the whole rather than isolated images.

Korean photographer **Young Kyun Lim** also retrieves fragments of his daily life, without however placing them in any kind of conceptual framework; his are the melancholy and introspective notes of a globetrotting *flaneur* who is always careful to maintain a certain distance between himself and the world. His gaze is often turned upon small details of his immediate environment such as café tables and hotel beds, or else his cigarettes and reading matter. On the other hand, the people he depicts are invariably displaced towards the horizon, photographed from a great height, or wrapped in mist and rain; even the numerous self-portraits give nothing away, since they are mostly shadows or dull reflections. Surely not by chance, the only clearly visible faces in the entire sequence entitled *Destiny* are those of an old photograph in an antique dealer's window. This emotional aloofness may perhaps be ascribed to Lim's active Buddhist faith, which according to Matthias Harder is an indivisible part of his life and practice.<sup>24</sup>

The timeless digital landscapes of **Deborah Baker's** *Ghosts in the Nursery* weave together two strands of family iconography: panoramic photographs taken by Baker's great-grandmother in the Mourina suburb of pre-revolutionary St.Petersburg, and a range of older and more recent family snapshots. "These images", comments the artist, "are my reflection of personal memory and family history", adding that "the generations are brought together within the panoramas to communication with each other and create fictional and factual narratives."<sup>25</sup> The strangeness of the images is underlined by the extra-wide format of the soft inkjet prints which, as Liz Wells has pointed out, "reminds us of the wide screen of the cinema, a format associated with unfolding narratives".<sup>26</sup>

**Katerina Kalogeraki**, who lives and works in London as a photographer, was born in a small Cretan village. She returned in 1987 in order to photograph her birthplace and its inhabitants, particularly the members of her extended family. The images she took, though in traditional documentary idiom, are accompanied by texts - mostly fragments of conversations with relatives - which lead the work in other, perhaps more interesting directions. The recorded comments all focus on what from the villagers' point of view were the photographer's anomalous personal and social circumstances: "*Next time you visit us, we all want to see you with a man*" (uncle Sophocles), or "*Parents who have no grandchildren are unhappy and unworthy*" (her father). In a recent analysis of *My Father's Land*, Penelope Petsini suggests that "it is not intended primarily as an objective record of life in rural Greece, but rather as an account of the photographer's subjective experience. Its purpose is to describe an individual's emancipation from the narrowly restrictive mindset of a small community and the subsequent process of coming to terms with her origins through the making of this work."<sup>27</sup>

The Law of Napoleon's Hat is well-known to museologists; put simply, the law states that even the humblest and most uninspiring of objects acquires glamour and interest when

associated with some eminent person. That is why in different museums around the world one may admire George Washington's wooden artificial teeth, Voltaire's quill, Lord Byron's slipper and the cufflinks of Eleftherios Venizelos, even though in most cases the association may have little basis in fact and must be taken purely on trust. **Nayia Yiakoumaki** has photographed a series of small, ephemeral objects which are subsequently presented in the shape of large-format colour prints with all the seriousness appropriate to, for instance, Napoleon's hat. To justify the process, she places alongside each image a text which claims to explain the particular emotional value the item depicted has for the photographer or somebody close to her. It remains for the viewer to accept these explanations at face value or to reject them, since personal narrative is allowed to hover between testimony and invention.

**Julian Stallabrass's** *Anatomy of Photography* is an ambitious projection piece which "matches up a set of pictures and a quasi-fictional narrative, written by a photographer in diary form that interweaves memories, dreams and thoughts about making photographs".<sup>28</sup> Stallabrass's thoughts on the making of photographs are valuable, not least because he is one of the few critics today willing to contest capitalism's seemingly irreversible appropriation of art and the latter's decay into a branch of the entertainment industry. "Photography", he writes, "[makes] living things a little less alive. It is the same with the material and the immaterial. A shadow in a photograph has the same solidity and presence as a concrete block. The concrete is flattened and made spectral, the shadow is set in stone. How much is the fascination with photography caused by these qualities which so closely mirror the play of persistent illusions under capitalism? If people are treated like things, and things take on the liveliness and character of people, if people's liveliness is constantly sacrificed to the production of things, then the action of photography is an appropriate and ever-present metaphor for this process."<sup>29</sup>

\*\*\*\*\*

Photographic narrative as testimony, as invention and as personal experience. There is another aspect of narrative which this brief essay has so far ignored, an aspect which photography, with its characteristically polymorphous nature, also partakes of: that of narrative as game, narrative which surprises, confuses and amazes the viewer in the same way that Laurence Stern and Italo Calvino surprise and amaze the reader. Such narratives, each in its way different, are proposed by Takis Zerdevas, Alexis Vassilikos and Patrick Ward.

**Takis Zerdevas' Curriculum Vitae (Incidents)** recounts the photographer's life in flies. In an enclosed space, a (photographed) fly comes to light upon a (real) table. Suddenly, a (photographed) hand armed with a glass shoots out and tries to trap the fly – but it misses, and soon the annoying buzzing is heard once more, so that the miniature drama is re-enacted over and over. Zerdevas stages his conjuring trick with images and loudspeakers, with photographs and projections: mirrors and smoke, as the expression goes. Outside the site of the tragedy (is it worth remembering that Sartre's version of the *Agamemnon* was entitled *The Flies*?) hangs his curriculum vitae, decorated with flies.

**Alexis Vassilikos** constructs an elaborate, even delirious installation in order to answer the implied existential question "when I grow up, I shall be...". No one answer is adequate, and so a blizzard of images succeed one another on the monitor providing a variety of options: if and when Vassilikos does grow up he may, depending upon his ambitions, choose to become *a bear, a person going places, an ear donor, a Trojan Horse, a star burning for you alone, bad company, partly absent, a hoverer, a cactus photographer, roasted or still waters* among many other choices. The small green horses and the rat trap which form part of the

installation are probably there for purely aesthetic reasons, and aesthetics, as is well know, are not amenable to rational debate.

The five photographs which **Patrick Ward** includes in his series *Unidentified Backgrounds* reveal precisely that: anonymous landscapes in which nothing much seems to be taking place. They are technically rather poor, while the only thing they have in common is unusually wide expanses of sky; they might almost be the very negation of narrative. And yet these images once played a starring role in one of the most popular contemporary narrative codes, since they are snapshots of UFOs - except that Ward has digitally removed the flying objects, leaving the now mysteriously dumb landscapes. In the same space, the visitor can hear a variety of voices which every now and again seem to be calling out or pleading, without ever receiving an answer: "Annie? ..... Elsa? ..... Fred? Fred, where are you? ..... Paul? ..... Mike? ..... Mike, are you there? .....". What is going on here? If he is a movie buff, the title of this sound piece, *Last Scene*, may remind the visitor of the culminating moments of old thrillers and horror films in which somebody stumbles about in the dark, seconds before opening the wrong door and coming to a gruesome end. This, it seems, is truly narration's point zero: stripped down to virtually nothing, it has the perverse effect of stimulating the narrative instinct precisely where it is most powerful: in the audience's imagination. *Mike, are you there?*

© John Stathatos 2004

"Ways of Telling", Thessaloniki Museum of Photography, Thessaloniki 2004

---

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Lucy Souter, "Dial 'P' for Panties: Narrative Photography in the 1990s", *Afterimage*, January 2000.
- <sup>2</sup> Benoît Peeters, "Le roman-photo: un impossible renouveau ?", in *Le Roman-Photo*, Rodopi, Amsterdam 1996, p.17.
- <sup>3</sup> Peeters, as above.
- <sup>4</sup> Marc-Emmanuel Mélon, "Une tres vieille et tres vague cousine de Bretagne?", in *Le Roman-Photo*, Rodopi, Amsterdam 1996, p.139.
- <sup>5</sup> Christian Metz, "Le cinéma: langue ou langage", in *Essais sur la signification au cinéma*, v.1, Klincksieck, Paris 1968, p.53.
- <sup>6</sup> Fred Ritchin, "Close Witnesses: The Involvement of the Photojournalist", in Michel Frizot, *A New History of Photography*, Koneman, Cologne 1998, p.602.
- <sup>7</sup> Ian Jeffrey, *Photography: A Concise History*, Thames & Hudson, London 1981, p.178.
- <sup>8</sup> James Guimond, *American Photography and the American Dream*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill 1991, p.170-171.
- <sup>9</sup> Guimond, as above, p.168.
- <sup>10</sup> Among the few exceptions are John Demos' *H Ellada pou chanete* (1976), Costis Antoniadis' *La Grèce hors saison* (1982) and Lizzie Calligas' *Site and Sight* (1988).
- <sup>11</sup> Kostas Balafas, *The Acheloos River: Currents and Counter-Currents*, Thessaloniki Museum of Photography, 2002; Kostas Sakelariou, *I teleftei Ellines tis Polis*, Agra, 1995; Yiorgos Katsangelos, *Thriskeftika*, Thessaloniki, 1997; Paris Petridis, *Gamilio Album*, Istos, 2002.
- <sup>12</sup> Paul Bonaventura, "Paul Graham: The Troubles", online article, *Circa*, Dublin 2003.
- <sup>13</sup> John Stathatos, "Hiding in the Open", in *Paul Seawright: Hidden*, Imperial War Museum & Irish Museum of Modern Art, London & Dublin, 2003
- <sup>14</sup> Christos Kalos, unpublished account, August 2003.
- <sup>15</sup> "Nan Goldin talks to Tom Holert", *ArtForum*, March 2003.
- <sup>16</sup> Pericles Boutos, Artist's Statement, November 2003.
- <sup>17</sup> Published references to Prokopiou's photographic work are limited to Alkis Xanthakis' *History of Greek Photography* and to an article by his grandson, G.A. Prokopiou, in the supplement to *Kathimerini* newspaper of 26 October 1997.
- <sup>18</sup> Clare Doherty, "Give me a child when he is seven...", *Portfolio* 30, winter 1997.
- <sup>19</sup> Tony Godfrey, "Sex, Text, Politics: An Interview with Victor Burgin", *Block* 7, 1982.
- <sup>20</sup> Souter, *op. cit.*
- <sup>21</sup> Peter Galassi, "Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort", catalogue essay, MOMA, New York 1991.
- <sup>22</sup> Val Williams, "Look at Me: Fashion & Photography in Britain", catalogue essay, British Council, London 1998.
- <sup>23</sup> Unlike similar 'personals' in Britain and the States, the Greek ads are firmly aimed at matrimony rather than casual dalliance; they are published in the *synoikesia* section of newspapers - literally, 'arranged marriages'.
- <sup>24</sup> Matthias Harder, "Destiny, Photography as Appropriation of the World", in *Young Kyun Lim: Destiny*, Münster 2002.
- <sup>25</sup> Deborah Baker, unpublished note, 2003.

---

<sup>26</sup> Liz Wells, "Erasing Time-Lines", *Portfolio* 37, 2003.

<sup>27</sup> Penelope Petsini, "Representing the Familiar: Private Images in New Greek Photography", in *Ellinikes Fotografikes Meletes*, 2002, ed. John Stathatos, Thessaloniki Museum of Photography and Kythera Photographic Encounters, 2003.

<sup>28</sup> Julian Stallabrass, unpublished note, November 2003.

<sup>29</sup> Julian Stallabrass, "The Life of Objects", from the unpublished text *Modern Times*, 2003.