

# Good News

By Robert Adams

In 1886 a group of painters, among them remarkable men like Degas, Pissaro and Seurat, arranged to hold an exhibition in Paris. On opening day the crowd was for the most part characteristically hostile. Signac, another of the participants, afterward described one visitor whose ways were representative in tone; the man apparently spent the day running between the exhibition hall and a nearby cafe, enlisting everyone he could to come and join his ridicule. He was so anxious, in fact, to get in with his new recruits that he would impatiently toss his entry fee at the turnstile attendant and not even wait for the change.

The incident is recounted by John Rewald in his *History of Impressionism*, a disturbing book as it catalogs the abuse to which the impressionists were subjected. Rewald's conclusion is bleak: "the only thing to be learned from the critics was how to suffer the sting of their attacks and carry on just the same, accomplishing a task which more than any other required serenity." It is a summation that has, unfortunately, some relevance even today.

Recently I spent an evening with a photographer whom I had not met before; the time was pleasant enough in one way — he seemed to like my work — but as the hours passed I wanted the thing over. Except for half a dozen of us, the lucky few, he dismissed people and their work with a Germanic thoroughness; it seemed as if he were going down the index of an imaginary survey of contemporary photography; with each name he pronounced the harshest judgment, and, whenever possible, added scandal. I was reminded of my years in graduate school among literature students, many of whom were already failed writers, apparently condemned to being articulate only about their bitterness.

Though this particular photographer's disease of spirit is unusual in degree, it is unfortunately not unusual in kind. Poorly concealed envy is suddenly commonplace among us. A sense of generosity and community is abruptly gone.

When I am looking for ways to explain this, I can

find them. There are too many of us, and as we go without work, the numbers of academics rise, and then they go unemployed too. The money problem sours a lot. Not long ago I discovered that it would be possible for me to earn an adequate living by lecturing about photography, but at the same time I knew that it remained impossible to survive by photographing, by doing what I was to lecture about. Irony of this sort does not sweeten life.

The rancor that one finds now in discussions of photography is, however, complex in origin. There is, for instance, the fact that photographic criticism is currently mostly the province of the young, some of whom have not yet often enough made fools of themselves to be cautious, or suffered enough to be charitable. And there is the frustrating nature of the medium itself; in photography it is harder than in painting to establish a recognizable style; this has led to desperate efforts to get style at any cost, first, and in turn to some technically accomplished but otherwise empty pictures that have angered those who must write about them.

Reasons for bad behavior do not, however, excuse it. One is left on the one hand with, in many cases, uncivil and unjust criticism, and on the other with the pictures, and with what we learn from photographers about their creation. What disturbs me is the unrelatedness of much critical rhetoric, which is frequently savage, to the experience of the artist. David Smith, the sculptor, wrote once, in bewilderment, in his journal, "Does the onlooker realize the amount of affection which goes into a work of art — the intense affection . . . and total conviction?" It is a commitment that was perhaps most eloquently explained by Camus in a description of the creative process: "I am talking about what all of us, artists unsure of being artists, but certain that we are nothing else, wait for day after day, so that in the end we may agree to live." That is what the photographer, among others, tries to make — something so important that by it he, and he hopes we, can agree to live. To do this he runs risks and makes sacrifices, and it is open to question whether some critics understand this

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when they attack. Edward Hoagland, an essayist who does understand, synopsized well, in a review in the *New York Times* of a photography book, the price paid for creation in photography:

Photography, among the arts, is especially naked . . . . If a bully can dishearten, say, a novelist, by telling him that all the world's stories have already been written, how much easier it is to badger a photographer with the claim that every picture has been taken a hundred times. The novelist can solemnly sit on his manuscript for years, not telling anyone what he is working on, show it to no one, and who can say he's a phony? The photographer in the meantime is out in the ruck of the street, to all appearances as scruffy as if he were still running backwards taking wedding pictures.

To go after the photographer, this desperate clown, with quantities of acid is itself, in a worse way, clownish.

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Camus observed, on another occasion, that "the only people who can help the artist in his obstinate quest are those who love him, and those who, themselves lovers or creators, find in their own passion the measure of all passion, and hence know how to criticize." My assumption is that as critics we do want to help artists. If a critic's proper function is to save us from failed art, it must also be to save us by preserving successful art, by rescuing important artists from isolation and discouragement, and thus by enabling them to continue to work.

What I would like to explore, then, is how we might aid photographers of vision. Or, restated, to ask what kinds of critical responses to photographs are useful — what kinds promote the creation of more and better pictures.

And, to begin with, if I were to choose a model of the critical response that seems to me in short supply I would point, at the risk of seeming an evangelical preacher or just a sentimentalist, to that illustrated catalog that friends of Man Ray once prepared of his work. It was entitled simply *Good News*.

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What are legitimate bases for the judgment of photographs? Since it is always easier to be negative, let me begin by suggesting some widely used but wrongheaded bases for judgment, ones we might profitably abandon.

The most popular one is, I think, *sincerity*. It is a

topic dear to many adolescents because, in the thrill of disillusionment, they believe themselves to have made a revolutionary discovery — there are people who are frauds.

Among the fundamental problems in applying this accusation as photographic criticism is that it is, as literary critics learned several generations ago, hard to prove. It is one thing to suspect a person of being false, and another to establish that he is; the photograph is there, the only relevant evidence, and it is difficult to make it prove the case.

The fact is, it seems to me, that we all act out of a mixture of motives. Most photographers themselves cannot say for sure why they photograph. This uncertainty is a legitimate prod to self-scrutiny, but is not much of a basis for scorning others' suspected compromise. We all have to eat, and how we connect that need with the needs of the spirit is a matter none of us can afford to be especially self-righteous about.

In fact let me suggest a thesis, just to put "sincerity" in its place: "sincerity" is often, in at least some senses, a negative attribute in an artist, who by definition is looking for *Form*, for overall shape in life beyond the limits of immediate social or economic or political conditions. Some of the worst art, it is to be noted, is done by the most sincere people (in this connection I am reminded of the principle enunciated by the film maker Godard: "One only speaks well with detachment."). James Joyce, for example, might be accused of not being a very sincere Irishman; he does not really seem to care as much about Irish independence as he does about using the struggle for it to illustrate other truths. Walker Evans might be accused similarly of having not been very sincere in his concern for poor southern farmers; does he not really use them as particularly defenseless stand-ins for all of us, and is not that use rather cold and insincere?

The term *sincerity*, then, has with art to be subtly affixed, so that it refers eventually to what might be called the sincerity of the artist's detachment. When we discuss that, we are coming close to a legitimate critical focus, because with it we are concerned with the essence of his art, the overall configuration an artist finds in his material, the meaning he discovers in the seeming confusion of life.

Another improper standard of judgment is, it seems to me, *biography*, the artist's life. It is not legitimate to dislike Marianne Moore's poetry because she wore crazy clothes or Faulkner's novels because he drank too much, and it is not particularly germane to attack a picture because the person who took it worked for *Life* magazine or

a university, was or was not a socialist, did or did not like Minor White, and so on. Max Kozloff suggested a while back that an introductory book on a photographer ought to detail, among other things, "the artist's class origins" and "professional contacts." As a general rule, no it should not, the reason being that the only things that distinguish the photographer from everybody else are his pictures; they alone are the proper basis for our interest in him. If pictures cannot be understood by themselves, then that is a reason for faulting them; major art is, by definition, made to stand alone.

Finally, I hope as the years pass that critics will drop as much of the heavy academic machinery as is consistent with getting at the truth. Elaborate ideational schemes for interpretation, such as psychoanalysis, tend generally to lead away from the photographs and, in the process, to oversimplify what is mysterious and of greatest value in the work. As George Orwell once wrote, "one can only interpret a poem by reducing it to an allegory — which is like eating an apple for the seeds." I like that simile because there are so many wonderful pictures of apples (think of those by Cezanne, Stieglitz, Steichen . . .) and we don't want to forget to enjoy eating them.

Ideas are, however, the prime concern of some, so watch out. Orwell, in the same essay, illustrated the dangers of overinterpretation by quoting a passage from a book on Hamlet. "In . . . Hamlet, an unconscious incest-wish incapacitates the hero for marriage with the girl he has wooed . . ." Orwell then observes, in a line I like to quote to my intellectual friends, "Very ingenious, one feels, but how much better not to have said it!" How much better, Orwell implies, would the play seem — how much richer, how much more complex, like life itself.

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Suppose then that we agree to leave off on sincerity, the details of a person's private life, and interpretive diagramming. What then?

To begin with, we ought to decide whether *any* public discussion of a particular work is appropriate. There are legitimate reasons for being hesitant to speak. Silence is, after all, the context for the deepest appreciation of art; the only important evaluations are finally personal, interior ones. (A scene I particularly enjoyed in *Annie Hall* was the one in which Woody Allen, standing in line with Diane Keaton to get into a movie, is forced to listen to a man behind them explicate films; what agonies cross Allen's face.) And even assuming public discussion might be helpful, there are so many ways to make it unhelpful; with photographs, because they tend to be less inflected

than paintings, there is, for example, the question of whether one has seen enough (Cartier-Bresson was right — anybody can take one or two good pictures, or by extension, a lot of bad ones); fairly to guide public taste requires a great deal of preparation.

Let us suppose, though, that one has carefully determined that a body of work is bad, unambiguously bad. If so, is it not the critic's duty to speak up? Isn't there an obligation actively to clear away the second-rate and the imitative? A critic's job is to support work of merit; how can good work thrive unless the other is conscientiously separated out?

Such questions are not to be answered quickly. John Rewald, in talking about Seurat and his imitators, located the center of the problem: "While it is true that those who tried to *cash in* on the researches of Seurat and his group were so weak that they only underlined the strength and originality of the others, it is also true that public success, when it came at last, temporarily went to them, as it always goes to the vulgarizers before reaching the initial inventors." Art history is full, of course, with people who did not live long enough to enjoy a sympathetic public, and their misery argues that criticism should actively try to speed justice.

On the other hand, there is the amply documented possibility that a critic's judgment may be wrong (one defender of the impressionists asserted that *no* newspaper had *ever* discovered a new figure of talent; it is a hard thesis to refute even now). And there is a tactical consideration: in those cases where there is a defensible need for making, in public, a negative judgment, usually the most damaging negation is silence. It is a truism among publishers, for instance, that a bad review, no matter how bad, is better than no review at all. Their attitude is grounded in economics, I admit, but even looked at more seriously, a negative review usually implies at least that the issues raised by the work are important. No review implies the worst — boredom.

Maybe on occasion, then, we do not need to fear bad work as much as we had thought. Perhaps we can sometimes just let it do itself in. Conceivably we have been guilty of overkill, as were the judges of the French salon, who for some years stamped an "R" on the stretchers of rejected paintings.

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If one's decision is, nonetheless, to write or speak, one's first obligation is absolute — *clarity*. Much criticism is apparently based on the mistaken notion that because art is mysterious, criticism should be too. But criticism and art are not synonymous. Criticism's job is to clarify, without destroying, art's mystery. Short of that it is a

clumsy, intrusive embarrassment. When I read *Art Forum*, for example, I am reminded negatively of an axiom by Robert Graves: "The writing of good English is a moral matter." The failure of *Art Forum* is therein precisely described. It is clotted with jargon, vague abstractions, tortured syntax — all evidence of the writers' concern with themselves. If there is a practical corrective, I sometimes think it might be for the writers to be forced to emulate the eighth century Chinese poet Po Chii, who, according to Arthur Waley, "was in the habit of reading his poems to an old peasant woman and altering any expression which she could not understand."

Assuming that one writes as lucidly as one can, what is the proper subject? Henry James proposed asking of art three questions. They are modest and appropriate: What is the artist trying to do? Does he do it? Was it worth doing?

The first question — what is the artist trying to do? — can, I admit, bog one down in critical subtleties. How does one know an artist's intent, except in those rare cases where there is a diary or other outside evidence? The only final proof of intent is in what has been called *achieved intent*, the finished work itself; the rest, it can be argued, is irrelevant. But what I think James had in mind is more a matter of common sense, or what one might wish were common sense. He just suggests that we start out by asking what it seems like the goal was. It sounds like elementary justice, but countless reviews are based on violating that justice. Ellen Glasgow, the novelist, put the issue well a long time ago: "Surely, there can be no worse fashion in criticism than the practice of rebuking an author because he has not written another, and an entirely different book, which he had no intention of writing . . ."

After asking "What is the artist trying to do?" James' second question, "Does he do it?" is simple logic. To answer it one checks whether the work is internally coherent, whether the end sought is reached within the rules of operation established by the artist himself.

The last question (it cannot be asked, as some critics would, before the other two) — "Was it worth doing?" — is of course the most important. Many academics would like to avoid it entirely, but the rest of us won't let them. We insist, finally, that a critic make plain his own values. Mine, for example, when I try to measure whether something was worth doing, run to questions like these: Did it reveal *Form* (which is to me a synonym for beauty)? Was it fresh; did it make old truths new? Was it a work of significant scope; did it reconcile important elements that had before seemed irreconcilable? All of which come, I suppose, to

asking whether it helps us, in Samuel Johnson's phrase, to "better endure or enjoy life."

James' three questions outline the right methodology, then, but heaven knows they do not ensure success. There are only a few people who seem able to write effectively at length about photographs. Among these few, the best — John Szarkowski — is I believe so good that he will be remembered as having been the equal, or more than that, of Stieglitz in his constructive influence on the medium. His writing has made him envied, of course, but the irony is that his competitors seem to miss some of the most obvious keys to his success. Among these is that he writes only about what he likes. It is a practice that cuts down competition from the start; to be clear about how and why something works is difficult, whereas just to turn one's animosity loose on something weak is both fun and safe (who can accuse you of being sentimental?) No wonder that the affirmative essays stand out and, assuming they are about respectable work, last longer. Weak pictures drop away of their own weight, as does discussion of them, but the puzzle of stronger work remains; we are always grateful to the person who can help us see it better.

To put this another way, our best critics have the courage to take what seems the biggest risk, to forget themselves. Critical writing about successful pictures is a calculated and in some respects doomed redundancy, repeating in words what and how a picture means, duplicating it in other than the optimum mode, which is, if the picture works, obviously the visual mode. The only thing that can bring this off, assuming gifts of insight and expression, is the deepest commitment to share a picture with others. Anything less than that means defeat, calling attention not to the picture but to oneself.

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I sometimes dream of an ideal photographic journal, maybe one distributed on microfiche so we can all afford it. In my imagination it is assembled in somebody's garage in the Midwest. It is a magazine devoted to successful work because that is all we have time for; it is a journal notable for its tact and civility and lucidity (a form of courtesy), and it is a magazine full of pictures because they are the point. We might just call it *Good News*. And we won't allow ourselves to be labeled sentimentalists, because our title does not imply that good news is, in the short run, *the* news or even a majority of the news. Actually, calling for good news is a request based in pessimism, in a belief that good news is rare and that we cannot afford to overlook any of it.

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I would like to close with two thoughts, courtesy of others, one for critics and the other for photographers. First the one for critics, as it was phrased by the director of the art department at Immaculate Heart College in Los Angeles: in her words, "All people in this world are made to *give evidence* or to signify something. Perhaps it can be said that as artists some are made only to show what surface light does to color. . . Still others may be here only to reveal the possibilities of the color blue." In that spirit we ought, as critics, and as people often called upon to judge our colleagues, to remember that no subject matter is unimportant, and no human response to it unworthy of our attention.

The word of encouragement I would like to give to photographers is in the form of a statement by Matisse about painting, a statement we can apply by analogy. Matisse once remarked that "a painter

has no real enemy but his own bad paintings." It is possible that, were I to look at your work, I would misunderstand or misjudge it, but my mistake would be of limited significance, assuming that your work is substantial and that you who made it see it clearly. A good picture powerfully vindicates itself in time; it is far stronger than a mistaken critic.

"A painter has no real enemy but his own bad paintings." That statement brings me back to the proper subject of criticism. Surely a photography critic's most important job is, in the highest sense, to help photographers of promise defeat their only real enemies, their own bad pictures.