

SPEAKING TO THE IMAGINATION: A Reading of Personal Geography

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"Photography is not a simple duplication or a stopwatch of the eye that stops the physical world, but a language in which the difference between reproduction and interpretation, as subtle as it may be, exists and allows an infinite number of imaginary worlds. Even those things that seem to be fully described in our view can in their representations in fact be the blank pages of a book still to be written".⁽¹⁾

Luigi Ghirri's comment develops a thread between the visual languages of photography, the means by which they are interpreted, and the way that the imagination of the viewer makes any interpretation its own. He thus places the sort of photography he is describing beyond the confines of the 'slice of reality' type of definition, moving away from the seeming certainties of modernism. He equates this photography with literature, reckoning that, in order to explore the 'reality' it suggests, we read the language of that photography just as we do the words on a page, connecting the ciphers of that language with the imagination in order to establish a personal set of meanings.

From the range of methods that have been used by photographers to investigate the possibilities of conveying meaning outside those supplied by the photograph as a mirror of reality, the use of landscape as a vehicle has not featured until relatively recently. Too often the very word has been conflated with 'nature', and it has needed the recognition that, in the media-dominated world of recent decades, landscape has been affected by human activity to the extent that nowhere can be connotation-free. Landscape has been redefined as environment, no longer free-standing, but acting as a containment area for activities in history. Luigi Ghirri again provides a text: "All of our environment (especially in Italy), all our rural and urban landscape bears the mark of man, was shaped by the stream of culture".⁽²⁾ Patrick Shanahan's work is further removed from the immediate connotations that Ghirri's statement suggests. The direct references to cultural history and occasional hint of surrealism that appear in Ghirri's photographs are absent, although Shanahan feels that he is exploring some similar ground, producing images where ambiguity invites interpretation. This area of exploration is compounded by his admiration of Ghirri, one of the prime factors of the movement in contemporary Italian photography investigating the 'social landscape'.

Place, inhabitants, past, present, elements of time and space, clichéd but accurate, are the constituents of both the geography and the history that Patrick Shanahan's photographs represent. Not that there are many signs to guide the viewer towards a choice of meaning, there is no 'decisive moment' nor a definitive narrative. Shanahan photographs as he walks through landscapes (environments) that interest him, but which he does not necessarily invest with importance. Therefore the sense of history and geography are unfocused, we know that these photos are evidence of activity, but we can't be precise as to its nature or location. We can only guess, and, regardless of its accuracy, a guess is still only a guess.

It's almost as if Patrick Shanahan is following clues, but without a specific scenario to piece together. The photographs are dense, they don't yield up their secrets easily, if at all, which, perhaps, echoes the photographer's experience in his interaction with the subjects of his photographs. The fact that he does not feel sure of the full meaning of what he sees and photographs is a part of his interest in producing photographs. This makes his experience parallel that of the audience, whose knowledge is incomplete owing to their

absence from the historical and geographical specificity of each photograph. The audience's inability to be specific makes the photographer's position almost poignant. While any narrative content is open to interpretation, it works like the text of a poem, providing a surface, or starting point for its audience's explorations. Shanahan's experiences, with all of their personal resonances, are moments in time and space only hinted at in the photographic evidence, although these photographs specify its existence. The viewer's curiosity is aroused, there are suggestions in the photographs, but these set up subjective connotations. The photographer's intentions seem to remain obscured.

Beside the evidence of Shanahan's interest in the work of recent and contemporary Italian photographers, there are also similarities with some of the work of William Eggleston. But, while many of Eggleston's photos have a trace of documentary left in them, the ghost of Walker Evans passing through from time to time, the remnants of that tradition are absent in Shanahan's photographs. Interestingly enough, Evans was much admired by Luigi Ghirri, in common with Eggleston, and one feels that this reflects the poetic rather than the documentary qualities of his work. That poetic element is made particular in Eggleston's work due to his inclusion of people, elements of his personal background, and geographically specific titles, but Shanahan's engagement with his subject-matter is more diffuse. He provides little or no explanation, nothing specific, not even the inclusion of titles. His reasons for taking a photograph, besides the obvious formal considerations, are not immediately evident in the photographs. As they are not clarified in any other form, one draws the conclusion that he is pondering over the meanings implicit in the subjects he photographs, in the same way as the audience might when viewing the photographs he has made.

To confirm the inexplicit nature of his photographs, Patrick Shanahan points out that his choice of image for printing is made from contact sheets which contain repeated shots of images and locations. This process is a recognition of the multiplicity of possibilities available whenever the camera is used, not "a dialogue with the 'real' based on a desire for 'total' representation, but rather an expression of the instability and the relativity of the photographic gesture."⁽³⁾ That relativity is further emphasised by the radical changes in scale to which Shanahan subjects his images, moving from contact sheet to 1.25 metre square final prints. The visual effect of such large colour images is so different to what was seen through the viewfinder or on the contact sheets that it places photographer and audience in a relatively similar position. Both are receiving these images as new, as opposed to the modernist dichotomy where the artist delivers and the audience receives.

As these photographs stand alone, without the anchorage of text or even title, they open themselves to as many connotations as they have spectators. However, a semiological tension is set up where the observer's connotations are tempered by the desire to know the photographer's intention. The specific content of each photograph suggests a focus for private thoughts, connotations that stand outside any shared experience between photographer and viewer. The one text that we do have manages to remain ambiguous. Whose is the 'Personal Geography' and the 'Private Landscape'? This question is left hanging on purpose in order to relate the experience of the viewer to that of the photographer, who is not aware of all the connotations the photographs have for him until he has produced prints of his choice of images. The reluctance of photographers like Shanahan to allow the photograph to inform directly creates a new sort of relationship between audience and photographer. Instead of accepting the expertise that enables the photographer to direct their gaze and resulting thoughts, the viewer has to ponder over the photographer's reasons for the sort of interpretations that are observed. We start to

want to know the photographer's intentions, and to consider the mind-set that found meaning in what we see before us. The photographer's existence intrudes into the photograph, in this case in order to translate passive existence into active, to make the content of each photograph speak. "The job of the existential artist is to make what is, stand - no matter how apparently insignificant it is." ⁽⁴⁾

The photographer's intentions begin to become clearer when we make a closer inspection of the use of 'existential' in this context. As part of his explanation Sartre states "We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world - and defines himself afterwards." ⁽⁵⁾ This connects with the sense that Shanahan reflects on the content of each photograph rather than attempting to define it in advance. He has quoted Umberto Eco's definition of a work of art as an "ambiguous and self-reflective message" ⁽⁶⁾, and described himself as a diarist. Applying both comments to his work, this reflection is apparent, maybe providing a personal analysis (as diaries do), but leaving space for other interpretations. He states "As many realities exist as there are people and experiences" ⁽⁷⁾ and invites us to look at the evidence of some of his experiences as particular but not necessarily significant occurrences, perhaps echoing Julian Barnes' comment "Every situation is ordinary and every situation is also unique." ⁽⁸⁾

It is interesting to note that, while there is little evidence of documentation and didactic intent, Shanahan's photographs do relate to aspects of human activity in the environments he chooses to record. He is looking at a 'social landscape', and, like other contemporary photographers, there is a recognition of social issues apparent in the content. It is, however, implicit rather than explicit, and communicated by means of cipher rather than symbol, which matches the density of the visual information. This type of photography requires connotative interpretation, not direct(ed) reading, "the polysemous language of the cipher does not speak to the intellect so much as the imagination." ⁽⁹⁾ Again both photographer and audience's experiences are paralleled but not shared. There is ambiguity, and a sense of anxiety as to the signification of content. Although the photographer has had the advantage of being present at the sites depicted, there are no preconceived ideas.

The only area in which the photographer exercises control is the choice of images, which appears to be a set of decisions on predominantly formal grounds. While chance may occur in terms of the subject-matter and its arrangement in the chosen images, the final arbitration concerns aesthetics. Photographers of the 'social landscape' interrelate with fine art practices such as conceptual art; Robert Smithson seems to have had a wide-ranging influence, while Keith Arnatt appears to have crossed, or conflated disciplines. However, photography appears to retain a need for a degree of aesthetic convention no longer as evident in fine art. This may still be necessary for photographs, which have different cultural significance to artworks. There is a greater expectation for representation in a photograph, so the formal qualities have to be emphasised in order that conventions of content and meaning may be defied.

However, the direction of photography such as Shanahan's does not reside with formalism, that kind of photographic equivalent to abstract painting, but seems to be moving into the area of poetry and fiction. Like literature, this photography deals with representation in a complex manner, using codes and ciphers, metaphor and connotation. It provides a visual text which each viewer reads just as they would the verbal text of a poem, interpreting it according to the idiosyncrasies of their own experiences and imagination. There is, however, no dominant narrative, no homogeneity; the photographer does not direct, but

rather attempts to provide images for shared puzzlement.

"The facts even when beaded on a chain, still did not have real order. Events did not flow. The facts were separate and haphazard and random even as they happened, episodic, broken, no smooth transitions, no sense of events unfolding from prior events."⁽¹⁰⁾

[Mike Venning, March 1996]

- (1) Luigi Ghirri, "Still Life", Camera Austria No 7, 1981
- (2) Luigi Ghirri, "The Little Figure on the Rim of the Grand Canyon", Camera Austria, No 21, 1986
- (3) Roberta Valtorta, Catalogue Notes, "Diari", an exhibition of photographs by Alessandra Capodacqua, Barbara Chiarini, Paola De Pietri, Roberta Orio, Milan, Studio Marangoni, 1995
- (4) Mike Weaver & Anne Hammond, "William Eggleston: Treating Things Existentially", History of Photography, Vol 17, No 1, Spring 1993
- (5) Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Existentialism', 1946, quoted by Antony Flew, "An Introduction to Western Philosophy: Ideas and Argument from Plato to Popper", London, Thames & Hudson, 1978
- (6) Patrick Shanahan, Proposal for PhD Registration, 1996
- (7) Ibid.
- (8) Julian Barnes, "Talking it Over", London, Jonathan Cape, 1991
- (9) Mike Weaver & Anne Hammond, op cit.
- (10) Tim O'Brien, "Going After Cacciato", epigraph, Bret Easton Ellis, "The Rules of Attraction", London, Picador, 1988