



Joel Sternfeld  
*McLean, Virginia, December 1978*  
*(original in color)*

## *The Plot Thickens Everything*

### PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE NEED FOR NARRATIVE

RETURNING HOME to Rome from a vacation in the Italian Alps, a traveler gathered his friends together in a local trattoria. He wanted to tell them of his recent culinary adventures. So he ordered a round of drinks and began the tale of a small village he had discovered. It had fabulous food and was so incredibly tidy that none of the men there had beards. They were also a self-reliant people and refused to employ anyone from the outside for their daily needs.

"It was a joy," the traveler said, "to find a place that did not care to have anyone else to worry about their well being."

"Ah, but they must have a very good barber," his bearded friend replied, "because not everyone likes to shave."

"You're right. I was told that there was an excellent barber living there," the traveler answered, "who shaves every man who does not shave himself. They've got it all worked out. The whole town is helpful and charming, especially in the restaurants."

This was more to the point, as the real story he wanted to tell was about a delicious dinner of rabbit and mushroom risotto. So he ordered another round of drinks and began in earnest, telling of the slow, tortuous drive up the mountainside in chilly evening air, of the glow of the inn, of the rotund owner, and above all, of the aroma of the meal in preparation. His mathematician friend, the one with the beard, suddenly asked, "Hey, who shaved the barber?" A third friend, a photographer, somewhat annoyed by the setback, volunteered that the barber must

have shaved himself. With a sigh, the traveler went on to the details of the rustic table setting. But the mathematician cut in again, "Noooo. The barber shaved those who did not shave themselves. As the barber, he could shave himself, if he did not shave himself." A typical mathematician, the other two thought. The photographer, who was a practical observer of the world, then offered that one of the villagers shaved the barber as a favor. Relieved once again, the traveler launched into a description of how the feast began, how with cocktails in hand the host had invited the dinner party into the kitchen to inspect the glorious, simmering risotto and chat with the chef.

"Noooo," the mathematician broke in again. "Our friend distinctly said that the barber shaved those who did not shave themselves."

"OK," the photographer answered marshalling his smattering of mathematical reasoning, "They were *all* barbers!"

There was a brief moment of silence, and then another kind of sigh, as this answer satisfied neither the mathematician nor the traveler, who responded,

"It was not a village of barbers."

As this was an impasse that required more stimulation, the traveler stood for another round. This was not the way the risotto lover had envisioned the unfolding of his narrative, and it seemed that the divine meal was fated to remain forever on the storyteller's stove. Besides that, it was getting late. The profit-minded manager of the trattoria had also noticed the hour. He sent his most ingratiating waitress over to see if she could find a way to get rid of them before the evening crowd arrived. As the manager looked on, the waitress leaned over the table into the knotted conversation, listened for a moment, and said something. The three friends rose in thankful delight,

and left. Happy with the sudden solution, the manager rushed over to find out just what she had said.

"Amazing. They looked so happy for having been told to leave," he exclaimed.

"I didn't tell them to leave," the waitress replied and smiled her beautiful, self-assured Italian smile. "I told them the barber was a woman."

Everyone understands that "story problems" in mathematics are never true narratives with people to care about or good last lines. They merely set up a calculation and leave their characters hanging. I rescued this story problem of self-referential logic by dressing it up and giving it an ending that had nothing to do with the original question under discussion. Although it provides a way out of the puzzle, it also illustrates the two worlds in which we live: the narrative world and the matter-of-fact world.

The waitress with her personal point of view and her imagination found a new solution to the mathematician's matter-of-fact puzzle by resolving it in a narrative way, giving it a human dimension and a feminist twist. Explaining the inexplicable is one thing that narrative has always done. Noah and the rainbow becomes a story – with an ending. The matter-of-fact observation of Sir Isaac Newton concerning the behavior of light as a wave – as it encounters mediums of different refractive indexes and reflects at equal angles from the interior spherical surface of a suspended drop of water, coming back to the viewer at an angle of forty-two degrees from the original source of light – is not.

Whenever a narrative plot or an explanation is in evidence, it thickens everything like rabbit and mushroom risotto. It forces disparate things together and makes odd "facts" cohere.



For instance, Joel Sternfeld's early photographs from his 1987 book *American Prospects* serve as good examples of what odd facts can create when left unexplained. In these photographs something is either happening before one's eyes or has just happened. As one examines them, questions arise that beg for explanations. But as accurate as his large format photographs are, no explanation is in evidence. One is free to make up reasons for how things got the way they appear to be. One turns into an arbiter and becomes the Rudyard Kipling of the "Just So" stories or the Isaac Bashevis Singer explaining *The Fools of Chelm and Their History*.

In one memorable Sternfeld photograph, a wood-frame house perched on a hill is engulfed by flames as expensive fire-fighting equipment sprays the roof with a jet of water. In the foreground, however, a solitary firefighter in a yellow slicker leisurely inspects pumpkins at a farm stand. Sternfeld's title for the photograph, *McLean, Virginia, December 1978*, answers nothing about why the man is not attending to the roaring blaze. There are no other clues and the viewer is trapped, like the three Italian friends, in trying to form a logical explanation from a few stray pieces. But that is precisely the point of Sternfeld's first book: the inexplicable is a delightful no man's land of reason, and the imagination has free range as long as the picture is devoid of an accompanying narrative.

Later, Sternfeld took a different approach when he recognized the power of the narrative element and gave it an unconventional role. In his 1996 book, *On This Site: Landscape in Memoriam*, the accompanying titles have been extended into labels describing an event in the past that took place on the site. However, in the scenic pictures themselves, no narratives or explanations are suggested. Everything in the composition



Joel Sternfeld, *Gateway National Recreation Area, Rockaway Peninsula, Queens, New York, September 1993* (original in color)

seems settled and at peace, and unlike his earlier work, no immediate questions come to mind from the elements the pictures contain. But knowing his earlier work, one senses that something more is yet to be revealed.

One of Sternfeld's site photographs shows an unoccupied stretch of a beach perfect for swimming, a line of old weathered pilings extending into the calm of a blue ocean, and a clearly delineated horizon on which what appears to be a white pleasure boat is barely perceptible in the offing. The whole scene is bathed in gentle early evening light. His caption has two parts. The matter-of-fact part reads: *Gateway National Recreation Area, Rockaway Peninsula, Queens, New York, September 1993*.

The second part of the caption, the explanatory part, reads:

*Almost 300 illegal Chinese immigrants struggled against the pounding surf to reach the shore of the United States on the night of June 6, 1993. Ten died of drowning or hypothermia; the rest escaped or were taken into custody.*

*The immigrants had endured four and a half months of brutal conditions in transit before their vessel, the Golden Venture, hit a sandbar 200 yards off this beach. They were crammed into a twenty-by-forty foot hold; food and water were scarce; sanitation conditions were sub-human.*

*Of those arrested forty-seven were deported to China, thirty were granted asylum, and forty-six were released. At the end of 1995, 147 were still in federal custody. Lee Peng Fei, the suspected mastermind of the failed voyage, had demanded \$30,000 from each would-be immigrant. He was arrested in Bangkok in November 1995.*

Once it is read, Sternfeld's extended caption creates a human dimension and puts the photograph into a narrative relief. We see that the matter-of-factness of the photograph and its seductive beauty leads one in another direction and thus disguises the significant story associated with the site. One is shocked to think that the innocent view, suitable for a kitchen calendar, is supposed to symbolize, or contain, or be witness to some horror. Viewers have come to expect that photographs do that because photojournalists and their editors, as well as those who stage public relations events, try to incorporate narrative elements into photographs to help tell their stories. Viewers thus feel that the visual elements of the photograph itself should somehow reveal, or at least be in character with, the purpose for which the photograph was made. But that is exactly Sternfeld's point: objective visual facts or even scenic views are only appearances and do not reveal purposes by themselves; they

have to be coerced. Stories occur at specific places and disappear from their sites with time. What better medium than photography – the medium of the actual, the incidental, the single moment, and the historical slice – to illustrate the way that the where and the when can be separated from everything else? Like the waitress's observation, Sternfeld's extended caption suddenly reveals another explanation, and in so doing creates a story of its own.

Recall again the differences between the matter-of-fact world and the narrative world. In scientific explanations about how the world works, if a major, new fact is accepted, practices change to accommodate it, and the old theory is discarded. Narrative is different. One of its endearing characteristics is that after one learns that a newly found fact proves something other than what was once believed, one does not always not discard the story that explained it, rather, one often treasures it more, believing it still contains other truths. Although narratives gum up the facts and distort reality for their own purposes, they still survive. Mother Goose and Grimms' fairy tales are still in print, as are the *Odyssey* and the five books of Moses.

But the matter-of-fact world persists and intrudes, and one cannot avoid it for long. So one needs to look at the relationship it has with the world of narrative when photography is between them. There is, as with most things, a simplified and a complicated approach.

The voice who can lend most credence to the simplified approach is himself a complicated man, the French poet, Paul Valéry. Valéry had a keen interest in mathematics and philosophical logic and was a revered member of the Académie Française. In January 1939, when the French were celebrating their own 100th anniversary of the invention of photography by



Louis-Jacques Mandé Daguerre, a symposium was held at the Sorbonne. Valéry was asked to deliver a brief lecture. The sixty-eight-year-old master of mind and language had a solid and conventional notion about what photography was. Although he may not have kept up with avant-garde figures like Man Ray, André Kertész, or the young Henri Cartier-Bresson, all of whom had established their names in Paris at the time, he did know some photographers, such as Laure Albin-Guillot, from having portraits made. And, of course, he had a way with words like no one else. He said: "Thanks to photography, the eye grew accustomed to anticipate what it should see, and to see it; and it learned not to see nonexistent things which, hitherto, it had seen so clearly."<sup>1</sup>

Valéry remarked how photography could show with perfect accuracy such things as the way horses actually moved in a gallop or a trot. Such studies of motion in the late nineteenth century by the American, Eadweard Muybridge, and the Frenchman, Etienne-Jules Marey, had been known for decades, and it was part of what most people trusted photography to do. An analogous situation today would be the public's captivation with photographs taken in space. No special narrative is needed for these extraterrestrial marvels to be admired, just the technical captions that are usually provided. As merely seeing what has never been seen before is fascination enough; narrative can wait. Although Valéry believed that photographs could be made to lie as language did, he felt that their inherent optical accuracy could release language from having to "convey the ideas of a visual object with any degree of precision."<sup>2</sup> He wrote: "So it must be agreed, then, that bromide proves stronger than ink, whenever the mere presence of things suffices, whenever the thing speaks for itself without benefit of proxy, that is,

without having recourse to the wholly arbitrary transmissions of a language."<sup>3</sup>

The second approach in dealing with the matter-of-fact world and the narrative world when photography is between them is the more complicated one. This approach might be illustrated by what the Surrealists appreciated about straight documentary photography. To them any attending explanatory narrative stifled the imagination. Narrative was unnecessary: if no story suggested itself, other things still went on. One object in a picture could confront another and create a disjunction similar to the odd elements in dreams. For them, the chaos of the world, like the unpredictability of the subconscious mind, was a readymade collage that photography could enhance with its objective transcription and a certain point of view.

It was not only the Surrealists who followed this track. In 1928, Pierre MacOrlan, the French novelist and journalist, explained another aspect of photography that both the Surrealists and the public in general appreciated. He tried to explain how the medium in the hands of photographers such as André Kertész could be more than a simple record of objects:

*[Documentary photography] is unwittingly literary, because it is nothing other than an observation of contemporary life apprehended at the right moment by an artist capable of seizing it.*

*The greatest field of photography, for the literary interpretation of life, consists, to my mind, in its latent power to create, as it were, death for a single second. Any thing or person is, at will, made to die for a moment of time so immeasurably small that the return to life is effected without consciousness of the great adventure.<sup>4</sup>*

The great adventure was not just the return to "life," but having the viewer complete the action. Although the Surrealists were

thrilled to leave the suspension where it was, for most people this coming back from a moment of “death” meant completing the action as a story. Editors and art directors caught on quickly and created visual layouts for their weekly publications that told a story in pictures with the aid of captions or a short text.

In the photographic world, the picture of the arrested moment – the incidental, we might call it – has acquired an elevated status. A scene taken from the flow of time, graced with its self-contained gestures, is something photographers have learned to capture extremely well. Unlike other visual art, in photography the incidental is often the primary reason for the picture having been taken in the first place. This forces one to try to devise surrealistic meanings for it or explain it with a story of one’s own making, which allows those beyond the photographer a role in the creative process. Photographers with highly refined senses of spatial arrangement and timing see extraordinary things in front of them every day that are essentially invisible to the rest of the world. But attention to minor incidental events is not exclusively a modern photographic practice, as W. H. Auden points out in his poem, “Musée des Beaux Arts”:

*About suffering they were never wrong,  
The Old Masters: how well they understood  
Its human position; how it takes place  
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just  
walking dully along.  
How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting  
For the miraculous birth, there always must be  
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating  
On a pond at the edge of the wood:  
They never forgot*

*That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course  
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot  
Where the dogs go on in their doggy life and the torturer’s horse  
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.*

*In Brueghel’s Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away  
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may  
Have heard the splash, or forsaken cry,  
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone  
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green  
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen  
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,  
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.<sup>5</sup>*

One of the masters of the incidental is Garry Winogrand. He has given the incidental a new importance. As he once put it: “The photograph isn’t what was photographed. It’s something else. It’s a new fact.”<sup>6</sup> This is a true complication of Valéry’s notion of photography and takes MacOrlan’s idea a step further. Although making another fact from a fact sounds like what storytellers do, the Winogrand photographs do not try to form themselves into completed stories. His photographs are somewhere in between the matter-of-fact world and the narrative world. Sometimes they are mere sight gags: at other times they are extraordinary scenes that the most gifted film director could hardly have imagined on his own. The world for Winogrand was too chaotic to comprehend fully, but too rich to reinvent as small, dumb staged events.

Winogrand did talk about his photography, but he did not usually tell stories about individual photographs. In his lectures, when people in the audience asked him why he took a photograph of a certain subject, his standard, but truthful,





Garry Winogrand, *Hard Hat Rally, New York, 1969*

response was: "To see what it would look like photographed." An exasperating answer for those who wanted inexplicable things explained. He would also get another common question: "What is this photograph supposed to mean?" To which he would answer, "The photograph is not my problem, it's yours." Although to some he seemed evasive, he felt it was not his job to hold the viewer's hand or to supply a kind of existential story problem and then shortcut to a neat, calculated answer. He wanted his photographs to have no "answers" and leave their characters and events hanging in them forever.

In contrast to Winogrand, W. Eugene Smith always seemed to have a purpose for his photographs and a story to tell. He understood the power of incidentals but almost always made them subservient to the picture story or the narrative sense of individual photographs. Unlike Winogrand, Smith was a man on a mission, always fighting an uphill battle for one social cause or another. Thus, he could not afford to allow the char-

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W. Eugene Smith, *Three Generations of Welsh Miners, 1950*

acters or the events in his photographs to be left hanging, available for any stray or private interpretation. For several years after the Second World War, in which Smith established his name as a daring combat photographer, his personal purpose and that of his editors at *Life* magazine found reconciliation, and he became one of their most celebrated photojournalists, one of their stars. Like a star, he also became one of their most highly unmanageable personalities. More and more he saw the world his own way and demanded a say in the selection process and the layout of his photographic essays. The corporate climate at *Life* magazine eventually made his independent way of working an exasperation to all concerned, and he resigned in 1954.

One might criticize Smith for shamelessly grabbing for



every heartstring he could reach. If he acted as if he were a desperate man, it is because he believed that lives were at stake. Photography for him was not just the mechanism by which visual facts were obtained in order to establish how horses trot. The quest for a compelling narrative affected the way he took, printed, and published photographs. Narrative was an essential part of his only effective tool in changing the world around him: the publication of stories with compelling photographs. His characters were never left hanging and were part of well-planned conclusions.

Perhaps the conventional view that Valéry voiced at photography's centenary is fated to return over and over again, as new generations of non-photographers tell us what they think the medium is, guess at the origin of photographic ideas, and dictate what photographers are supposed to do. But even if photography cannot see the nonexistent things that poetry can, it does not mean the same is true for photographers themselves. After all, if poets, like William Carlos Williams, step out of character in voicing the notion that there are "no ideas except in things," and Wallace Stevens wrote, "Let's see the very thing itself and nothing else," there may be a virtue in seeming to be out of one's assigned role. Going beyond the limitation of visual fact by establishing a narrative is what Smith tried to do in using some of the tricks of propaganda to his advantage. Winogrand found new subjects in suspending the flow of life, but disdained to guide the viewer to a story ending or a surrealistic amusement, and just left the new fact hanging as it formed. Sternfeld discovered that exposing the limitations of only knowing things photographically could be the most powerful device in making the story he wanted to tell more compelling.

As linguistically seductive as Valéry's remarks are, we do not

need to rely solely on those who are only the viewers of photographs. Recall what Winogrand, a true photographer, said: "The photograph isn't what was photographed. It's something else. It's a new fact."<sup>7</sup> This attitude frees the photographer, somewhat, from the tyranny of the original objects or the situations they create. Sternfeld made his point in a radically different way. If Winogrand's and Sternfeld's approaches leave little room for narrative of the kind that Smith employed, they bring us to a higher consciousness about the inherent lack of the narrative element in photography. Beyond the isolated visual fact that Valéry honored, the suspension that incidentals expose or the separation that conflicting captions provide create another theater of display and a way for photographers to respond to the matter-of-fact world in their own voice.

One question that remains is why, in our scientific and technological age, has narrative not been dismissed by fact or even by newly created facts in photographs. Why does it have a value beyond the quaint amusement of discredited explanation? Why is it still a force that photographers chose to assiduously avoid, draw from, or succumb to?

There undoubtedly is a simplified and a complicated approach to the answer. Perhaps the simplified approach is enough for now. Narrative, even though it is pressed into service for other chores from humor to philosophy, does one indispensable thing extremely well. What narrative does better than any other medium of expression is to directly address the question of what we think we know – not about being particles of the matter-of-fact world or elements of a logical puzzle, but rather about being human.