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Opening Extract from...

Working the Room

Written by Geoff Dyer

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Introduction

This collection of essays and reviews follows right on from *Anglo-English Attitudes*. The last piece in that book was written in 1999; the earliest one here is from the same year. To be honest, nothing much has changed in the interim. I write about whatever happens to interest me, sometimes accepting commissions from editors, sometimes writing pieces and sending them in on spec. A decade from now, by which time I'll be in my sixties, I hope to have enough new material to bring out a third volume. You see, I've got tenure on this peculiarly vacant chair – or chairs, rather. It's a job for life; more accurately, it *is* a life, and hardly a day goes by without my marvelling that it is somehow feasible to lead it. As in the earlier collection, there's no area of specialised concern or expertise; on the contrary, the pleasure, hopefully, lies in the pick 'n' mix variety, the way one thing leads to another (often quite different) thing.

Actually, one thing has changed: in the last ten years I've been asked to contribute introductions to quite a few books, either reissued literary classics or photographic monographs and catalogues. I love doing this and am especially grateful to the editors who somehow got wind of the idea that I was interested in Rebecca West or Richard Avedon or whoever and gave me the chance to get between the covers of a shared volume with them. This seems to me the greatest privilege that can be afforded any reader (even if it slightly undermines the idea of being – as I claim in a piece to be found later in this volume – a gatecrasher).

Booksellers and customers often complain about the difficulty of

knowing where to stock or find my books. A similar problem crops up here. There is, inevitably, a fair bit of seepage between the various categories on the contents page – Visuals, Personals etc. – but, overall, this seemed the least unsatisfactory way of organising the material. To make things a little less rigid these category headings are not indicated within the pages of the text itself, so that the very personal piece on ghost bikes is followed, without warning, by the first categorically Personal piece. Like this there are only invisible, ghostly residues of division in the unfolding continuity of the book.

There is also, inevitably, a bit of repetition. I see I keep coming back to Rebecca West or John Cheever or D.H. Lawrence when I'm writing about other people: they constitute the core of my personal canon, the writers I can't do without. The fact that Robert Frank keeps coming up as a point of comparison when I'm talking about other photographers might be a symptom of the author's inadequate frame of reference; or perhaps it shows that there is no getting away from him (I meant Frank but perhaps the same is true of the author).

I originally intended using 'My Life as a Gatecrasher' as the title for the whole collection but discarded it for the reason mentioned above. The current title crops up in the essay on Susan Sontag – 'Critics are always working the room' – but although it was absolutely perfect I couldn't use it because Jonathan Lethem had told me, a couple of years earlier, that he had the phrase laid away as the intended title of a future collection of his critical writings. I dropped him a line anyway and asked if he would consider loaning it to me. He agreed, and I'm extremely grateful to him for that characteristic bit of generosity.

G. D., London, June 2010

Working the Room


THE
DISCOVERY
OF INDIA
by JAWAHARLAL
NEHRU

Jacques Henri Lartigue and The Discovery of India

'*You can hardly expect me to fall in love with a photograph*.'
Jawaharlal Nehru

This photograph was taken by Jacques Henri Lartigue on the Cap d'Antibes in 1953. He was almost sixty by then, had been photographing for half a century. The picture is of a woman – I don't know who – propped up on a lilo or lounger on the terrace of some presumably luxurious hotel or villa. She's wearing a swimsuit and one of those fun wigs made of strips of coloured paper that you can buy in party shops. You can't see her eyes, she's wearing a pair of big plastic sunglasses, but there's a hint (and this is the lovely flirty thing about the picture) that she is glancing up at the photographer – which means that she is also glancing up at me, at us – rather than reading the unbelievably serious book in her hands: Nehru's *The Discovery of India*! It looks like it's about 800 pages long and weighs a ton. It wouldn't be anything like the same picture if she was reading *Bridget Jones's Diary* which, obviously, hadn't been published back then – but that's another thing about the picture: it could have been taken yesterday, it could have been taken today (especially now that white sunglasses are in vogue again).

The book is a touch of genius – either the genius of contrivance or of the moment – but, actually, if any element of the picture were removed (the wig, the glasses, the painted nails or lipstick) it would be thoroughly diminished. That's the thing about all great photos, though. Everything in them is essential – even the inessential bits.

It occurs to me that the things that are *not* in the photographs are also important. The inclusion of certain things can not just diminish a photograph but destroy it. In this case – all the more remarkable in a photograph taken in 1953 – the absence of a cigarette (so often considered an accessory of glamour) or ashtray is crucial to its allure and its contemporaneity. A cigarette would 'date' or age the photograph as surely as it ages the faces of the people who smoke them. If there were any evidence of smoking I would have to look away. As it is, I can't tear my eyes away. I can't stop looking at her.

So who is she?

But there I go, forgetting one of my own rules about photography, namely that if you look hard enough a photo will always answer your question – even if that answer comes in the form of further questions. Well, whoever she is, she's beautiful. Actually, I can't really tell if that's true, for the simple reason that I can't see enough of her face. But she must be beautiful, for an equally simple reason: because I'm in love with her. Lartigue, too, I suspect. Now, plenty of men have photographed women they love but this picture depicts the *moment* when you fall in love.

That's why the suggestion that she is looking up, meeting our gaze – the photographer's, mine – is so important: this is the first moment when our eyes meet, the moment that each subsequent meeting of eyes will later contain. If this picture is of a woman Lartigue has been with for ten years it actually proves my point: that look, that meeting of the eyes, still contains the charge of the first unphotographed look from way back when. As for me, since I've only just seen the photo, it's a case of love at first sight. And that, I think, is why Lartigue became a model for so many fashion photographers. The most effective form of subliminal seduction – the best way to sell the dresses or hats featured in photos – is to make men fall in love with the woman wearing them, and photographers are all the time trying to emulate or simulate that feeling. With Lartigue, though, it's for real, and the accessories on offer are what? A daft wig, some zany sunglasses and a hardback of *The Discovery of India*! That's the charm of the picture, its magic.

As I said at the beginning, they're all crucial, these ditzy accessories.

The book lends a hint, at the very least, of the exotic. And the wigs and glasses give the picture its faint but unmistakable touch of the erotic. If you want to see her without the wig and glasses then you are already starting to undress her. Not that there is anything explicitly sexual about this – it's more that you want to see what she really looks like. In other words, you want an answer to the question the picture insistently teases us with: to what extent is it posed, contrived? I'd love to know. It would probably be possible to find out by consulting one of the many books about Lartigue currently available but I prefer a less scholarly, more direct but – I hope – not too intrusive approach. '*Excusez-moi, mademoiselle. J'espère que je ne vous dérange . . .*'

2005


67 years of fine whiskey-making make this whiskey good
IMPERIAL
Blended Whiskey
ASTOR
CBS

Ruth Orkin's 'VE Day'

Photographs depict a moment but they can *contain* years, decades. Few, however, are as saturated with history as Ruth Orkin's picture of the crowd gathered in Times Square on VE Day, 8 May 1945.

To release this history from the image we need to go back at least to 1914, to the photographs of the 'long uneven lines' of men queuing up to enlist. For Philip Larkin, in his poem 'MCMXIV', the grinning faces make it all look like an 'August Bank Holiday lark'. Photographs like these are complemented by the ones taken in 1919, when an army of the surrogate dead marched past the Cenotaph in London in acknowledgement of the cataclysm that the lark had turned into. In another sense, though, the catastrophe was not complete: the ending of the First World War created the conditions for a Second. The treaty at Versailles merely closed a phase of a war that would last, with rumbling truces, until 1945.

The end of the Second World War left Britain militarily victorious but economically ruined. America, meanwhile, was unequivocally victorious. Power crossed the Atlantic. 'The United States', Churchill conceded, 'stands at this moment at the summit of the world.' That summit would not be attained until victory over Japan but Orkin's picture shows the jubilant future that is now within reach. In her novel *The Great Fire,* Shirley Hazzard paints a dismal picture of London in the immediate post-war period. Even in 1948, 'everything is shabby and sombre as in wartime, and greatly scarred'. When Albert Camus had arrived in New York two years previously, by contrast, his impression was 'of overflowing wealth'. This wealth is conspicuously adver-

tised in Orkin's picture. Churchill was obsessed with maintaining the British Empire but from now on the IMPERIAL march of American branding and merchandising will be unstoppable.

Orkin's picture also contains a certain amount of photographic history. Walker Evans had established street signs and billboards as part of the lexicon of American photography in the 1930s. (Orkin's behind-the-scenes shot of a historic event is also a behind-the-*signs* view that anticipates Robert Frank's 1958 picture of part – OH – of the Hollywood sign or Michael Ormerod's later view of a TEXACO sign.) Edward Steichen and Alfred Stieglitz had both photographed the Flatiron building at the beginning of the century, immediately adding it to the photographic catalogue of New York landmarks. The office block in the middle of Orkin's picture shares the high-prowed magnificence of the Flatiron building to such an extent that it looks, almost, like an ocean liner surging into the future. The name of this ship? Well, the figurehead makes that obvious: the SS *Liberty*! Although we are seeing an actual place, it is as if various geographically dispersed symbols of New York have been compressed into a composite of the city, a concentration of American-ness that is at once mythic and real. There is even something identifiably American about the people on the roof. The body language of the guy in the white shirt and trilby could only be American. Finding something 'peculiarly American' about Gatsby's 'resourcefulness of movement' Scott Fitzgerald wondered if this might be down to 'the absence of lifting work in youth' (which makes *us* wonder how places like Times Square got built in the first place).

The Third Reich had tainted the idea of the crowd. The carefully drilled Nuremberg rallies were frightening demonstrations of the way that a people could abandon the cherished ideals of the Enlightenment and plunge, willingly, into the darkness of the herd-instinct. In Times Square the crowd is not deliberately choreographed but the occasion was arranged in a way that has since become widespread in that its purpose was, partly, to be recorded. Orkin, in this respect, was the perfect person to do the recording. Her most famous picture is of a young American woman walking down a street in Florence, leaving a trail of gawping men in her wake. It's a classic piece of

spontaneous street photography – except it was set up in advance by the photographer and a model friend of hers. The lecherous Italians were actually being good sports, were playing themselves.

The Times Square crowd is good-natured, ecstatic. Cleverly, Max Kozloff, editor of the book *New York Capital of Photography* (the title alone is a fine example of the vaulting confidence that pervades America in the post-war period) juxtaposes Orkin's picture with Weegee's of the sardine-crowd on Coney Island on a sweltering day in 1940. Weegee's explanatory caption could be transferred to Orkin's: 'They came early and stayed late' – and, it could be added, they played their part with gusto. In the sixty years since VE Day, news stories and staged media events have become almost impossible to disentangle from each other. In keeping with this Orkin records the event as it is being recorded by CBS.

That logo looks quaintly old-fashioned but something else gives the photo a very contemporary touch: the woman to the right of the picture. The fact that she has gained access to this privileged vantage point is a significant achievement in itself. She could be one of the brainy, ambitious Vassar girls whose lives were chronicled by Mary McCarthy in *The Group*. As such she is a role model for the later masters – mistresses, rather – of discreet reportage such as Joan Didion and Janet Malcolm. Most obviously, though, she can be seen as Orkin's own deputy. Orkin stays in the background, unseen, but as Dorothea Lange, one of the pre-eminent documentary photographers of the 1930s, had recommended, she includes her own representative in the picture: 'a figure who is part of it all, though only watching and watching'. What makes this picture so utterly contemporary, however, is not the woman's presence but her *posture*. What is she doing? Cut her out of this 1945 photo and paste her into a shot of some contemporary news event – Pope X's funeral at St Peter's, for example – and you would swear that she was talking on a cell phone.

Since Orkin's picture shows people documenting an event that occurred partly so that it could be documented I began to wonder if there were photos which showed *this* document – this photo – being made. I found several – or thought I had. The best one, by an uncredited photographer, shows the view from behind Liberty. Exactly

as in Weegee's Coney Island photograph the people in the crowd raise their hats and wave to the camera. But even if you know where the HOTEL ASTOR is – or used to be; it has since been demolished – you can't quite make out the sign. And working out exactly where the unknown photographer was standing – finding him within Orkin's field of vision – proved far trickier than expected.



After scrutinising both photos I looked at the cinema just above the O of the hotel in Orkin's picture. It was showing a film called *Salty O*-something, starring Alan Ladd. And that same sign can be seen in its entirety (*Salty O'Rourke*), just above the sea of heads, at the far left-hand side of the other picture. Calibrating the various angles of vision was like trying to trace the trajectory of bullets from the JFK assassination – and the evidence didn't quite match up. I assumed that the shooter was somewhere below the American flags (above the reversed E of HOTEL) but that didn't make sense because the photo was taken to the right – from Orkin's point of view, the left – of Liberty. This meant it had to have been taken somewhere

below the IMPERIAL sign. If this was the case why couldn't we see the cinema showing the movies with Cary Grant and Ray Milland? Perhaps the news cameramen were in the way. They are – but glimpsed between the chest of the guy in the white shirt and trilby and his colleague you can *just* make out a few letters – the GRAN of Grant, the LAN of Milland – of this sign. We can now see the event from both sides. It is complete. By obliquely corroborating each other's testimony the two photographs seal us within the moment. But how long does this moment last, how far into the future does it extend?

Orkin depicts a day of boundless euphoria. The ship of Liberty sails into the future but in doing so – unlike the woman photographed by Orkin in Florence – it leaves increasing hostility in its wake. As the American imperium grows so the meaning of its symbols changes, especially in the Arab world. By the 1970s, to the Syrian-born poet Adonis (Ali Ahmad Said),

> New York is a woman
> holding, according to history,
> a rag called liberty with one hand
> and strangling the earth with the other.

Adonis' visionary poem is prophetically entitled 'The Funeral of New York'. A reaction of some kind to the hubris it depicts is inevitable. We live now in the aftermath of that reaction. 'Let statues of liberty crumble,' the poet continues. 'An eastern wind uproots tents and skyscrapers with its wings.' Taken in the middle of New York, Orkin's photograph stands right in the middle of the American century which began with the larking crowds of 1914 and ended with the shocked onlookers gazing in disbelief at the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001.

2005



Richard Avedon

In 1960 Richard Avedon photographed the poet W. H. Auden on St. Mark's Place, New York, in the middle of a snowstorm. A few passers-by and buildings are visible to the left of the frame but the blizzard is in the process of freezing Auden in the midst of what, in the US, is termed 'a white-out'. Avedon had by then already patented his signature approach to portraiture, so it is tempting to see this picture as a God-given endorsement of his habit of isolating people against a sheer expanse of white, as evidence that his famously severe technique is less a denial of naturalism than its apotheosis.

Auden is shown full-length, bundled up in something that seems a cross between an old-fashioned English duffle coat and a prototype of the American anorak. Avedon, in this image, keeps his distance. More usually his sitters (who are rarely permitted the luxury of a seat) are subjected to a visual interrogation that quite literally flies in the face of Auden's ideas of good photographic manners:

> It is very rude to take close-ups and, except
> when enraged, we don't:
> lovers, approaching to kiss,
> instinctively shut their eyes before their faces
> can be reduced to
> anatomical data.

Avedon's critics allege that this is what he did consistently and deliberately: reduced faces to anatomical data. At the very least, as Truman

Capote happily observed, Avedon was interested in 'the mere condition of a face'. If this had the quality of disinterested inquiry others claimed that his impulses were crueller, more manipulative – an opinion that Avedon occasionally confirmed. In 1957 he caught the Duke and Duchess of Windsor recoiling from the world as if it were a perfectly bloody little place. According to Diane Arbus this result was achieved by Avedon explaining that on the way to the shoot his taxi ran over a dog. As the Windsors flinched with sympathetic horror he clicked the shutter.

It has also been suggested that the photographs of crumpled, ageing faces were in some way Avedon's revenge on the fashion and glamour business in which he made his name, an explicit rebuke to the claim that his work was all surface and no depth. This opposition cannot long be sustained. As Avedon rightly insisted, 'The surface is all you've got. You can only get beyond the surface by working with the surface.' And the movement between the two activities, between fashion and portraiture was, in any case, constant and mutually informing.

A little detour, via French street photography, will show how.

Jacques Henri Lartigue's photographs have exactly the unposed, felicitous spontaneity that made Robert Doisneau's later image of a Parisian couple kissing immediately appealing. As is now well known, 'The Kiss' was deliberately choreographed by the photographer. In this transition, from the happy accidents of Lartigue to the premeditated charm of Doisneau, we can see one of the two contradictory but complementary impulses that have also animated the history of *fashion* photography. The unposed becomes the template for a pose; the miracle of the unguarded moment is always being turned into a style and a commodity.

Evidence of the other, contrary, movement is also found throughout the history of fashion photography. An established way of photographing models or clothes becomes too artificial, too static, too posed. Then someone comes along and, through a combination of ambition, daring and vision, injects an element of spontaneity, naturalness. Take any of the famous names in the history of fashion photography and the chances are you will discover that they once offered a liberating alternative to the staid, that they wanted 'to get away from the piss elegance of it all' (not Bailey, *Beaton*!) or felt like 'a street savage surrounded by sophisticates' (Irving Penn!). The peculiar twist of fashion

photography is that this 'naturalness' is achieved by – or immediately creates the conditions for – further contrivance. It cannot be otherwise, for the effect the images are ultimately intended to create (a willingness, desire or aspiration to purchase the stuff the models are wearing) precedes and has priority over what is randomly discovered.

This is why any discussion of fashion photography comes, inevitably, back to Avedon, who tirelessly and inventively raised the bar of contrived naturalness. Far from negating this practice his portraits are the most extreme expression of contriving a way of stripping away contrivances. One sees this nakedly in Laura Wilson's photographs of Avedon at work on the portraits of drifters and workers collected in *In the American West*: lights, assistants and blank white paper cut off his subjects from their natural habitat more completely than the bars of a zoo. Thus confined they are granted an anonymous kind of celebrity, ostensibly because Avedon was a photographer with an instantly recognisable style; more subtly, because the cumulative effect of ruthless stripping away is not simply to lay bare. Revelation is also a means of generation.

What, then, is being generated?

In the work of David Octavius Hill and his contemporaries, Walter Benjamin was struck by the way that 'light struggles out of darkness'. Benjamin went on to describe how, from about 1850 to 1880, the client was confronted with a 'a technician of the latest school' whereas the photographer was confronted by a 'member of a rising class equipped with an aura that had seeped into the very folds of the man's frock coat or floppy cravat'. Benjamin was adamant that the aura was not simply the product of primitive technology. Rather, in that early period, subject and technique were 'exactly congruent'. This lasted only a short while, for 'soon advances in optics made instruments available that put darkness entirely to flight and recorded appearances as faithfully as any mirror'. As a result the aura was 'banished from the picture with the rout of darkness through faster and faster lenses'.

With Avedon – 'that wonderful, terrible mirror', as Cocteau called him – the wheel came full circle. Absolute whiteness took the place of the darkness against which the light had struggled to emerge. And in this renewed and reversed congruence of subject and technique, a new aura and order emerged, one based on the reciprocity of fame. A famous

photographer takes pictures of famous people (people whose aura has seeped into their cravats – or shirts, or dresses – and whose aura, in the kind of inversion beloved by the Frankfurt school, is often the *product* of the cravats – or shirts, or dresses – which they have been paid to model and which he has been paid to photograph). In the 1960s and '70s, according to Diane Arbus' biographer, Patricia Bosworth, 'everybody who entered Avedon's studio was some kind of star'. Thereafter, even if you weren't famous when you went in, you sort of were when you came out. Either way, a portrait of oneself by Avedon was a highly personalised status symbol. OK, he might make your face look, as Les Dawson said of his mother-in-law, 'like a bag of spanners', but the photograph had the quality of – in fact was a record of – election. To be photographed by Avedon thus afforded a double means of *recognition*. Consequently people turned up for their session as if for a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, almost, as the saying goes, for a rendezvous with destiny.

Again this connects Avedon with nineteenth-century photographers such as Julia Margaret Cameron (with whom he felt a special affinity). Back then, according to Benjamin, everything about the elaborate procedure of having one's picture taken 'caused the subject to focus his life in the moment rather than hurrying on past it; during the considerable period of the exposure the subject as it were grew into the picture'. In these pictures, 'the very creases in people's clothes have an air of permanence'. Avedon, of course, worked with split-second exposure times but the results were in some ways even more striking: the creases in people's *faces* have an air of geological permanence. There is the sense, often, of a massive extent of time being compressed into the moment the picture was taken. 'Lately,' he said in 1970, 'I've become interested in the passage of time within a photograph.' So, in one of his most famous portraits, Isak Dinesen looks like she was once the most beautiful woman in the world – about two thousand years ago.

It's a picture which makes one think of the Sybil who asked for immortality while forgetting to ask for eternal youth. For his part Avedon wondered if people came to him in the same way they might go to a fortune-teller. (He was not alone in this: André Breton, Bill Brandt and Diane Arbus also believed the photographer should attempt to conjure a likeness which, in Brandt's words, 'physically

and morally predicts the subject's entire future'.) If that's the case then Avedon's prophecies are self-fulfilling and self-revealing. Character is fate. Or maybe that should read character is face. George Orwell famously claimed that by a certain age everyone gets the face they deserve; Martin Amis updated this: nowadays everyone gets the face they can *afford*. In America this might seem like a quaintly British distinction: you deserve what you can afford; as far as Avedon was concerned everyone's face got photographed the same way regardless (we'll return to that word shortly). Fame, face and fate were – give or take a consonant – synonyms. It was a credo that kept faith, simultaneously, with the hierarchy of glamour and the levelling gaze of biological destiny. Looking at his photographs we have the distinct sense that what is being uniquely revealed is, as Milan Kundera puts it in *Immortality*, 'the non-individuality, the impersonality of a face':

> The serial number of a human specimen is the face, that accidental and unrepeatable combination of features. It reflects neither the character nor the soul, nor what we call the self. The face is only the serial number of a specimen.

Hence the impossible contradiction whereby the devastating pictures in which Avedon's dying father seems to be dissolving into – or being reclaimed by – the white radiance of the backdrop show, according to his son, 'what it is to be any one of us'.

It was inevitable that, despite his undimmed energy and enthusiasm, Avedon succumbed to a kind of rote. In his last years, as photographer for *The New Yorker,* he sometimes seemed to be running on empty. He never lost the appetite for discovery but he kept discovering the same thing. The photographer who wished he 'just could work with [his] eyes alone' was so highly regarded that he was able, in a quite literal sense, to carry on regard-*less*. Even so, when he died, the huge swathe of his work, the sheer number of specimens he had scrutinised *over time*, suggested that it was not just an individual who had passed away. An era came to an end, too, the era when – at the risk of being tautologous – it was possible to be photographed by Avedon. At that moment the means of recognition were altered and diminished, permanently.

2007

