

THE PHYSIOGNOMY OF A NATION – ANATOMY OF A PHOTOGRAPHIC PROJECT

‘But these photographs, of necessity seen singly, are not conceived as isolated pictures made by the camera turned indiscriminately here and there. In intention and in effect they exist as a collection of statements deriving from and presenting a consistent attitude. Looked at in sequence they are overwhelming in their exhaustiveness of detail, their poetry of contrast, and, for those who wish to see it, their moral implication.’

Lincoln Kirstein¹

When photographic people get together, the conversation invariably gravitates towards current projects. ‘What are you working on at the moment?’ Recently, Mark Power’s answer to this question has been: ‘I’m photographing Poland’, or ‘I’m making work in Poland.’ In effect, he has been making a photographic survey of the Polish nation, a task that has now occupied five years and no fewer than 25 visits to the country.

But what exactly does this mean? It marks no little ambition and a deal of hard work to tackle a whole country. And what are we to expect? Given that Mark Power is a member of Magnum, the world’s most renowned photojournalistic agency, should we look for a documentary essay upon the state of the nation? Or might we expect a more personal odyssey, something closer to a visual poem than the dry report of a social scientist?

Two of the best-known photobooks of all, Walker Evans’s *American Photographs* (1938), and Robert Frank’s *The Americans* (1959)², set the benchmark, not only for how to plot and construct photobooks, but for intensive photographic musings upon a culture. Evans’s view of the eastern part of the United States during the 1930s has become so persuasive that museum curator John Szarkowski was moved to remark: ‘*It is difficult to know now with certainty whether Evans recorded the America of his youth, or invented it.*’³

Frank’s book was originally published in France, as *Les Américains* (1958)⁴, part of Robert Delpire’s ambitious plan to publish a series of monographs devoted to particular peoples or communities. Another in the series, *Les Allemands (The Germans)* (1963)⁵, by Power’s Magnum colleague, René Burri, was an extended photojournalistic

essay with analytical texts, and perhaps comes closer to what we might expect from a book that sets out to survey a country. Both the Evans and the Frank (particularly in its American incarnation, largely devoid of texts) seemed too elliptical, fragmentary, intuitive, and personal to function as any reliable guide to a nation's mores. Yet as Lincoln Kirstein asked in his *Afterword to American Photographs*: 'What poet has said as much? What painter has shown as much?'⁶ In Evans's photographs, concluded Kirstein: 'The physiognomy of a nation is laid on your table.'⁷

Note that Kirstein calculatedly used the word, 'physiognomy'. Physiognomy is a physical aspect, surface appearance, and so is especially relevant to photography. Because, most directly, that is what photography does – it records surface appearance. And in that sense photography could be deemed superficial. Photographers, however, should not be. They must necessarily utilise surface aspect, but use it intelligently, slyly, to communicate much more. In this case, Mark Power employed it to convey not simply the physiognomy, but the psychological state of Poland. He used the photograph – frozen, fixed in its vantage point – to suggest change, to record a nation in a state of flux, at a momentous, challenging and volatile moment in its history.

There is a difference, of course, between a photographer recording his own, familiar, culture and photographing another, as an outsider. Burri, a Swiss, was close to German mores when he made *Les Allemands*. But Frank, although a recent émigré, photographed America as a sceptical visitor, and was criticised for it. The question of whether the 'insider' or 'outsider' is better placed to make a portrait of a particular culture or social group has been an issue in photographic critical debate for decades. And even if one is tempted to dull the edges of the discussion by declaring that what matters is talent rather than cultural perspective, the disparity between insider and outsider (along with the treacherous waters of representational emphasis) remains, and should be respected.

Photography, we might remember, was developed in the 1840s by the two great colonial powers of the time, Great Britain and France, and could be said to be an important accessory in the implementation of the colonialist enterprise. So much early photography is in the 'travellers in ancient lands' mode, its aim to survey topographies, cultures, societies, and in a symbolic as well as a practical sense, to 'possess' them. As invented, the medium was an integral part of the knowledge industry and, as Susan Sontag noted, instrumental to the furtherance of empire building: '*to photograph is to*

*appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge - and, therefore, like power.*⁸

After Sontag and others in the 1970s criticised the tendency for photographers to aggressively ‘colonise’ and ‘appropriate’ others’ realities, the more thoughtful members of the profession have become circumspect in how, as travellers, they depict a society that is not their own. It hasn’t stopped photographers travelling, or exploring the unfamiliar – the unknown has an almost irresistible pull – but an intelligent and aware artist like Mark Power is extremely aware of how he represents something. To be sure, he is seeking to tell his own story in his photographs, but, within that rubric, also the ‘stories’ of others. His work is a complex amalgam of the subjective and the objective, although in general the tone of his imagery, by virtue of its nominal emotional distance, is scrupulously ‘non-judgemental’.

That term was used famously about the American New Topographics school of the 1970s⁹, a big influence upon Power and upon contemporary photography generally. One of the photographers in the original exhibition, Nicholas Nixon, remarked that *‘the world is infinitely more interesting than any of my opinions concerning it.’*¹⁰ Another of the original exhibitors, Lewis Baltz, talked of making photographs that appear to be *‘without author or art.’*¹¹

Books exemplifying the New Topographics approach and, like Power, utilising both colour and large-format cameras - Stephen Shore’s *Uncommon Places*, Joel Sternfeld’s *American Prospects*, Alec Soth’s *Sleeping by the Mississippi*, among others¹² - demonstrate the cool, distanced style of the New Topographers, but are also travel books. In all three cases, the example of Frank is paramount, as metropolitan photographers venture across America, almost like foreigners, in search of the essential America, but, perhaps also, in search of their own identities.

In the past four decades, it could be argued that there has been a similar search by European photographers for ‘Europe’. Indeed, since the 1980s and the opening up of international contacts between Europeans in the form of galleries and other photographic institutions, it could be said that there is now a ‘European’ photography, and that its primary subject has been the making of the ‘New Europe’. Indeed, a key work, which Mark Power knows well, was Paul Graham’s 1993 book of that name¹³, a project in which he had the nerve and ambition to tackle a whole continent, and in which, as Urs Stahel wrote, *‘the notion of a European spirit is again heralded.’*¹⁴

As the pan-European enterprise expanded in scope, especially following the momentous ‘collapse’ of communism in 1989, the potential for bringing Eastern Europe into the capitalist fold, and also the problems caused by this fundamental shift, became a subject of interest for photographers. A number of Western Europeans ventured east to document the great changes taking place in the former Soviet Union and the Balkan states. From these journeys several significant photobooks have been produced, including Luc Delahaye’s *Winterreise* (2000), Bertien van Manen’s *A Hundred Summers, A Hundred Winters* (1994), (an especially prescient view of Russia), Jonas Bendiksen’s *Satellites* (2006) and Jens Olaf Lasthein’s *Moments in Between* (2003). Perhaps of particular note is Cuny Janssen’s *Macedonia: Portraits and Landscapes* (2004)¹⁵, where the Dutch photographer comments obliquely upon that country’s recent past by using a combination of landscape and portraiture, although not quite in the same way as in this present volume.

Mark Power was aware he was tapping into an especially significant *zeitgeist* when he began his Polish project. It was one of the reasons he chose Poland when selected as one of ten Magnum photographers commissioned to photograph the ten newly created EEC member states in 2004.¹⁶ He had noted that, both in physical area and population, Poland totalled approximately the same as the other nine countries combined. Poland, he thought, would make the biggest impact upon, and also be impacted most by EEC membership. He was also acutely aware of Poland’s tormented history caught between two countries with empire-building ambitions – Germany and Russia. Furthermore, on a more personal but no less significant note, Poland was where he took his first holiday with his partner Jo, in 1989.

When he began the commission, in September 2004, Power was finishing his ‘London’ project, *A System of Edges*, later published as *26 Different Endings*.¹⁷ In the familiar *A to Z* street atlas of London, fifty-six pages indicate where London’s ‘city’ ends and the ‘country’ begins. Power visited each area indicated on these pages, the periphery of the metropolis, where he made a series of photographs from the very edge, each looking out at the ‘unmapped’ territory beyond – those landscapes that fell just off the map. It was a very defined, specific project, which is good in one sense, for it keeps the photographer focussed, but it can be restricting and lead to frustration. On the other hand,

a project with an open brief gives the photographer freedom, but it can be daunting, especially at the start.

This happened to Power. By the end of *A System of Edges* he felt constrained by its tight conceptual framework, but when he arrived in Poland he felt confused rather than free. Warsaw's size intimidated him, so he took a bus to Białystok, a town near the Eastern border he had visited some fifteen years before, but made only ten pictures in three days. Concerned with his lack of progress he contacted Magnum for assistance, and they found him Konrad Pustoła, a young Polish photographer and trained economist, who would act as his guide, translator, debating chamber, confidante, and friend for the next three years. Power traded ideas with Pustoła, talked photography and Poland with him, until the Pole had an almost sixth sense of what would interest the Englishman, and could take him where he could find it.

Trekking around Poland with his local guide and large-format camera, Power recalls he felt a little like one of the early pioneers of photography, exploring foreign lands in the 19th century. They were inevitably accompanied by 'native' guides; their view, however, was an outsider's – invariably colonialist, Eurocentric and superior; a view very much of the 'other.' Power was acutely sensitive to the fact that his was an external view, albeit of a fellow European country, but he resolved to turn this to his advantage.

His choice of working method is significant. The large, 5x4 inch camera, which must be used on a tripod, produces a certain kind of result – still, calm, detailed – an image with a monumental, authoritative quality that demands contemplation and analysis. It is a far cry from the instant expressive gratification of smaller cameras and the 'slice of life' approach. The large format camera is usually employed at a distance, both physical and psychological, and this distancing not only appears to hide the hand of the photographer but it also creates a neutral mood, upon which the viewer can more easily project their own reading. It seems an unmediated window upon the world, not the photographer's mirroring of it.

Furthermore, such a camera is very visible. The photographer cannot snap quickly, unseen, and move on in an instant. The seemingly old-fashioned equipment is conspicuous; it attracts comment from passers-by, and can therefore be a useful 'ice-breaker' – a not inconsiderable advantage in the current cultural climate, where photographers are viewed with suspicion. Indeed, another reason for Power's passionate

involvement with Poland is that in countries like Britain, Power's homeland, it is becoming increasingly difficult for photographers to work in public without being challenged.

The process of completing a photographic project like *The Sound of Two Songs* is twofold. Firstly, there is the making of the pictures. Then there is the process of evaluating and editing them, as part of making a book or exhibition. The first is a intuitive, visceral procedure, the second a calculated, cerebral one. Of course, some photographers calculate and pre-plan the shooting to the nth degree, but Power was content to let serendipity (and Konrad Pustoła) lead him. This not to say that he was unthinking, or unaware of the shape the project was taking, but that he was freer in his approach than in some previous projects. He also admits that, despite the uncertain beginning, he particularly enjoyed this way of working.

In the end what matters most are the seventy images contained in this book, selected from some 2,200 negatives. And if 2,200 doesn't seem a lot (you can easily shoot that in a day with a digital camera), the 5x4 camera requires an enormous investment in care, consideration, time, and money. The large-format sheet film photographer rarely exposes more than 25 negatives in a day, frequently much less.

The first observation to be made about Mark Power's imagery is that it deliberately sets out to subvert received notions about photography of Poland. He eschewed both the picturesque 'heritage' landscapes and the gloomy, clichéd views of the Nazi death camps. Some may say that Power's particular mode, seeking the inherent poetry in the ordinary, has become an art photography cliché in itself. But Power has merely drained his imagery of lugubrious romantic overtones, scrupulously maintaining a nominally neutral, respectful, and properly distanced tone. Of course, it's an illusion, but an important one to maintain, for it does not browbeat the viewer.

There are no views of Auschwitz here, but in Poland Mark Power could not avoid the country's history. Any serious photographer photographing the present is also photographing the past, and a test of the best photography is the way it intersects with history. Good photography, poetic photography like Power's, is a mix of clarity – depicting succinctly what is there; and suggestion – implying what has been and what might be there in the future.

If that sounds pretentious, let us take an example from *The Sound of Two Songs*. The image on pages 34-35 shows a large greenhouse, or some other kind of glazed

industrial building, behind a fence topped with barbed wire. In the left foreground are a group of mature birch trees, the present reality. It could be said to be a simple image about nature and culture. The signs of industrial enterprise, however, might symbolise Poland's future, and all those EU subsidies. The birch trees, of course, evoke the name Birkenau (or Brzezinka in Polish) – ‘the place of birch trees’ – the original village upon which Auschwitz-Birkenau was built.

The Holocaust – a Polish tragedy as well as a Jewish one – reverberates throughout. A picture of a pile of discarded metal ducting in a Gdansk bunker, which echoes grave documentary photographs we have seen, and know, is followed by an image of portrait snapshots in a shop window, a rare image that echoes art (a Christian Boltanski shrine) as well as life. But Power also pays attention to the more recent past, and to two conflicting ideologies that shaped the country. There are some twelve-storey communist apartment blocks – once derided in the Western press, but hardly worse than the notorious Peckham eight-storey blocks in London. And an ideology with a much deeper grip on the Polish consciousness, the Roman Catholic Church, is not neglected either. In April 2005, the Polish Pope, John Paul II (née Karol Józef Wojtyła) died. He was a great source of pride to this deeply religious nation, and Power contributes a potent picture of crowds in Warsaw watching his funeral, beamed live from the Vatican on a bank of giant television screens.

Past, present, future. Power's images are to be enjoyed at a purely aesthetic level, firmly in the present, his camera supreme in taking us ‘there’. But the thread of metaphor evoking past and future runs doggedly through the book, in image after image, forcing us to consider their implication. A path through a pine forest – an especially beautiful picture – perhaps conjures up another infamous place name from Poland's past, Katyn. But facing this image is a portrait of three young children, encapsulating the country's future. Yet the pairing also reminds us of fairy tales we all grew up with, often from Eastern Europe, which invariably take place in dark, eerie forests.

Power scatters portraits throughout the book's sequence to interrupt the landscapes and urban views, which are the natural prerogative of the large camera; a Polish portrait typology à la August Sander perhaps. There is one image of three generations of women, presumably mother, daughter, and grandchild, clutching their carrier bags from *Biedonka*, one of Poland's most ubiquitous and inexpensive supermarket chains. But generally they are of younger people, the emphasis forward

looking once more, such as the confident young woman of the bourgeois class, standing by her swimming pool, wrapped in fur against the winter, or economic blasts.

Like that of any photographer, or any artist for that matter, Mark Power's vision of Poland is not a definitive one. How could it be? It is partial, subjective, very selective, oblique even, yet it is a persuasive one. He may have allowed serendipity to take him to the pictures, but once he had found them, he used his photographer's intelligence and sense of what he wanted to communicate to make a meaningful sequence. He says that while making the pictures he first clung '*to the idea that the project was about the new European opportunity*'¹⁸ until he began to realise that the most important images for him were about so much more, even about photography itself and the things he enjoyed looking at. Quite simply, he was liberated by a poetic and more lyrical analysis of history and landscape, and how this shapes things perhaps more than we realise. Making the book was a journey of discovery for him, a case of *how do I know what I know until I hear what I say?* All art, all photography, is a journey of discovery, but it is the best artists and the best photographers who invariably find something.

Mark Power begins *The Sound of Two Songs* with an image of the dawn. He ends it with an image of dusk. The dawn photograph suggests promise, hope; the dusk picture – a distant cross on a snowy hill by the frozen Vistula river – is much more ambiguous. The cross represents Poland's past, which had its glories, but also its moments of darkness. Yet *The Sound of Two Songs*, although a serious piece of work, is by no means a dark one: it includes moments of unalloyed beauty, especially in the winter landscapes. Rather, the book is ambiguous, elliptical in tone. One could even say uncertain, although that might simply mean an openness, and open-heartedness of spirit. The cross in the final picture both beckons and reassures, but even in Poland, a deeply religious country, an increasing and perhaps inevitable secularisation makes the future more uncertain – but then the future is always uncertain.

Gerry Badger, March 2010

NOTES

1. Lincoln Kirstein, *Afterword to Walker Evans, American Photographs*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1938, p. 190.
2. Robert Frank, *The Americans*, Grove Press Inc., New York, 1959.
3. John Szarkowski, *Walker Evans*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Secker & Warburg, London, 1971, p. 20.
4. Robert Frank, *Les Américains*, Robert Delpire, Paris, 1958.
5. René Burri, *Les Allemands*, Robert Delpire, Paris, 1962.
6. Lincoln Kirstein, op. cit., p. 190.
7. Ibid., p. 195.
8. Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, Farrar Strauss & Giroux, New York, 1997, p. 4.
9. *New Topographics*, organised by William Jenkins at the International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, Rochester, New York in 1975, showed the work of Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Joe Deal, Frank Gohlke, Nicolas Nixon, John Schott, Stephen Shore, and Henry Wessel Jr. The exhibition, which used the word 'topographic' to define a notion of lucid, dispassionate, 'non-judgmental' objectivity in the work, was notable for looking back to the directness of early landscape photography. Such has been the interest in this exhibition that a whole recent monograph has been devoted to it, published by Steidl.
10. Nicholas Nixon, quoted in William Jenkins's introduction to *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape*, International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, Rochester, New York, 1975, unpaginated.
11. Lewis Baltz, review of *The New West: Landscapes along the Colorado Front Range* by Robert Adams, in *Art in America*, New York, Vol. 63, No. 2 (March-April, 1975), p. 41.
12. Stephen Shore, *Uncommon Places*, Aperture Inc., Millerton, New York, 1982; Joel Sternfeld, *American Prospects*, Times Books, New York, in association with the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 1987; Alec Soth, *Sleeping by the Mississippi*, Steidl Verlag, Göttingen, 2004.
13. Paul Graham, *New Europe*, Fotomuseum Winterthur and Cornerhouse Publications, Manchester, 1993.
14. Urs Stahel, *Thoughtful Traveller*, in *New Europe*, op. cit., unpaginated.
15. Luc Delahaye, *Wintereisse* (Phaidon Press Ltd., London, 2000); Bertien van Manen, *A Hundred Summers, A Hundred Winters* (De Verbeeldung, Amsterdam, 1994); Jens

Olaf Lasthein, *Moments in Between* (Journal, Stockholm, 1999); Jonas Bendiksen, *Satellites* (Aperture, New York, 2006); Cuny Janssen, *Macedonia: Portraits and Landscapes* (Schaden, Cologne, 2004).

16. The resultant exhibition, *Euro Visions*, was shown at the Pompidou Centre, Paris from September 15 to October 17, 2005, and subsequently toured in Europe. See also, Quentin Bajac and Diane Dufour, eds., *Euro Visions: The New Europeans by Ten Magnum Photographers* (Steidl Publishing, Göttingen, 2005).

17. Mark Power, *26 Different Endings* (Photoworks, Brighton, 2007)

18. Conversation with Mark Power, Brighton, February 16, 2010.