

Wit And Humor –The Hidden Talent of Elliott Erwitt ¹

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In photography, there is an underlying idea that for a print to be artistic, it must deal with a serious subject matter. There are few photographers, however, that attempt to look at the world not from a serious or deep perspective, but more so from a humorous and witty worldview. Elliott Erwitt is an American photographer, born in Paris, educated in Italy, who had to escape fascism at a very early age. One would think that such harsh life would produce harsh images. However, one of the things that characterize Erwitt's work is humor. He has an ability to capture the unexpected. His work is a visual alliteration of subject matter. Although when viewers first see his work, his most humorous and witty prints appear to be staged and look more like snapshots, in examining his work he attempts to capture the strangeness in life, and by doing so, he shows a world where the odd and strange becomes known through humor. He wants to impress upon us that those things that are familiar can also be humorous.

Elliot Erwitt has been a member of Magnum since 1953. His works and publications are widely viewed. Although his profession is a commercial photographer, his most well-known works often come "between jobs." (Elliott, Exposures, 24) Often, the photos he takes are not what editors want him to produce, and yet, he still continues to show and publish these strange and sometimes quickly photos. (Holmes, 121) A quiet man who often does not explain much about his work or himself did say: "I wanted to photograph, so I did...I had no special ambition about photography, but it seemed less unpleasant than other ways of making a living. Since then I have wondered whether I could have made it any other way." (Holmes, 123-24)

Humor can be defined as “The ability to perceive, appreciate, or express what is funny, amusing, or ridiculous.” (Webster’s, 885) Heinz Held, in the introduction to his book on humor in photography states “Photographers cannot produce humor, wit, or comedy. They have to track it down in real life. The cartoonist depends on inspiration, the photographer on chance...the ingenious photographer is one who sees something.” (Held, np) Elliot Erwitt’s work has all these different qualities about it. He is funny in that many times he will use visual expressions to entice the viewer to go beyond what is on the surface. These puns of sort are, for the most part, the most clear and easy manifestation of his humor. However, he does not stand just on visual tricks.

The idea of humor has not been well regarded in artistic circles, especially in photography. Few photographers (Carter-Bresson and Doisneau are two examples), have attempted to make humor an integral part of their work. Erwitt having learned from them has taken the idea of humor to a much higher level. In Erwitt’s photographs humor becomes an integral part because he shows “the gap between nobility and reality or between subject and setting, which blunder unpredictably into rhyme or battle with each other.” (Goldberg, 281) The same notion of Cartier-Bresson’s works appears to be present in Erwitt’s works. Michael Frizot has referred to Erwitt as “Bressonian.” (Frizot, 642). More so, Erwitt’s photographs appear to be in the same fashion as Doisneau’s “unposed” pictures. In both photographers there is a sense that want to convince viewers that “they are witnessing a scene from ‘real’ life.”² (Hirsch, 364)

However, Erwin’s photographs go beyond Cartier-Bresson or Doisneau’s work in that they also attempt to demonstrate that not all in life is perfect, and that sometimes, viewers may recognize the unexpected in the image they see (Goldberg, 281.) For example, in a series of groups he photographs there is one, shot on July 14, 1951—Bastille Day. The group at first

seems like any other except for the fact that everyone in the group, with a single exception, is standing on top of a bench. The female figure who is sitting appears to balance all the others around her. People stand proudly, yet are in a strange position. She, on the other hand, seems unhappy. Is it because she sitting while everyone else stands? Is it because she has little room on the bench? Or is it that she seem to be standing out in the crowd? By placing the woman in a sitting position, the viewers look more at the woman than the group. It is as if Erwitt is saying that although she is “comfortable” because she sits, she is quite “uncomfortable” because she stands out. What Erwitt is doing is photographing a pun on the idea of ‘standing out in a crowd’ by having only one person sitting down. He uses a visual medium to interpret wit and humor in everyday life. As Sam Holmes explains: “It is important to our appreciation that we feel he [Erwitt] has not tampered with the reality on which they [his photographs] are based. Everywhere we are surrounded by visual things which suggest meanings other than their literal ones.” (Holmes, 122)

Another example of his use of the unexpected is “Versailles, France, 1975” in *Museum Watching*. Here he shows a very small card pinned on the background of where a painting in a museum should hang. Museum visitors are staring at the card almost in the same manner that one would study a painting. Instead of ignoring the painting that is not there, all the figures in the photo stare directly at the small card. Even the painting on the left appears to be surprised by the behavior of the patrons and the man’s eyes in the painting are staring at the viewers. While the photo in itself may not be extraordinary, having taken it in the context of a museum is. Erwitt here questions the idea of watching an viewing. Everyone views what is not there, including the camera. It seems that Erwitt throws the notion of human behavior and our silliness inside of us. “[T]hey [Erwitt’s photographs] provoke a smile the first, the second and third times around.

That can only mean that we are amused with us. How grand of Mr. Erwitte to introduce us to our inconsequential selves.” (Goldberg, 282.) John Szarkowski writes that “Erwitte’s photograph would be to claim that the picture demonstrates some general philosophic truth; *e.g.*, it shows that the true function of museums is not to exhibit pictures, but to house treasures.”

(Szarkowski, 194) However, what kind of treasure is a typed card announcing that a painting is not there? Erwitte clearly laughs and makes us laugh by recognizing that our curiosity to view things is evident even when something is not there.

When we experience the unexpected, this is where amusement and wit come into play. Erwitte’s photos capture moments that taken by themselves demonstrate how strange human behavior can be. In “Bermuda, 1953,” we see four couples dressed in formal clothes. They all sit side by side, ignorant to each other. They all sit in order—man, woman, man, woman, etc. At the very far end there is a man lifting his hand, making a pointing gesture with a cigarette. At the same time, all the men are attempting to light cigarettes for their woman companions. In this photograph there is a sense of orchestration. The man at the far right is acting like a big band leader of the 1940’s, and the couples are the players. Because they are all dressed formally and because they are all doing the exact same thing, at the exact same time, the photograph is filled with wit and humor. If this was a staged photograph, the viewer would immediately notice the plastic nature of the shot. However, Erwitte captures a moment that is very real. In fact it is so real that it appears somewhat staged. And here is where the unexpected moment comes. Only someone with Erwitte’s sense of humor could see this and capture it in such a way that makes viewers laugh. Vicki Goldberg once wrote of Erwitte: “he uses the kind of accident and chance coincidence ... He uses them as proofs that the world is a silly predicament we have agreed to inhabit.” (Goldberg, 281)

One of Erwitt's most famous traits is that he photographs dogs from the perspective of the dog, not the owner. In one such case "Eire, 1968" in *Personal Exposures*, Erwitt sets the picture of a person who is holding a dog. In the way the moment is captured it appears that the person's face has been transformed to the dog's face. So, what is happening here? The idea that a man could have the face or head of a dog is ridiculous. Because it is impossible, it is also funny to see it now made possible in the print.

In Western culture there is an idea that pets are part of the family and that pet owners begin to reflect their pets features. Erwitt writes of pet owners "... they are forced to lead a life that is really schizoid. Every day they must live on two planes at once, juggling the dog world with the human world." (Erwitt, *DogDogs*, np) So, do humans invade a dog's world to break their habits? Or, do owners become more pet-like because they are living in a schizoid situation? Erwitt's photo makes a statement about this notion, and it is recognizing this idea that the unexpected comes into play. We laugh because we know this idea of people becoming pets is impossible; but we also laugh because in western culture sometimes it is very possible.

Erwitt also uses images that go beyond the surface in an attempt to expel any notion of artistically, to gaze at the world and to understand the ridiculous nature of human existence. In one instance he appears to laugh at the idea of what artistic intent means. In his photograph "East Hampton, New York, 1983" he photographs a group of art students standing nude as the model sits in the middle fully clothed. This is quite the opposite of what we expect. In his photograph he toys with the typical notion that we have of art. He is laughing at us for being surprised that the artists are nude and that the model is not. This photograph is clearly staged, but in doing so, he has created a different way of thinking the artistic. He reverses the roles of viewer and creator as if to say that we, as viewers can also create in our minds things that do not

appear to be in photographs. In fact, he goes beyond just poking fun at the idea of life drawing classes by having all the art students not be fully naked. Many have their socks or stockings on, as if this would somehow create a feeling of modesty.

Another of Erwitt's eccentricities is the way he designs books. In many of his books there is an important feature to which viewers have to pay attention: the composition of prints in opposing pages. For example, in the book *Dog Dogs*, he juxtaposes all his prints. It is funny enough to see them as individual prints, yet he places them together to accentuate their meaning. In one such case on the right-hand page there is a shot titled "Paris, France, 1956," where viewers see a dog defecating in the middle of street. Its eyes are straight to Erwitt's camera and the dog seem to be surprised at having been interrupted in the middle of something. We see this situation all the time on any street, yet why would anyone attempt to capture such an image on film? What is Erwitt thinking? What is the dog thinking? Then, he juxtaposes "Cornwall, England, 1992," on the left-hand side of page. This photograph is of a sign that does not allow dogs because of the propensity that owners have not to clean after them. The humor in the two pictures is greater because the design on the sign reflects the same type of dog, with the same surprised look on its face on the one hand, and on the other the nature of human behavior to attempt to control something that is natural.

Now the question of the viewer against the print comes into play. Why are we looking at this picture? Is this the power play of human authority against a dog's right? Is the juxtapositioning of the two photos asking us to extend our understanding of human or canine behavior? The viewers may overlap this dog's actions as an embarrassing human situation. By seeing animal behavior, viewers could interpret it almost as human-like behavior, and what we are witnessing is an embarrassing very private moment. The viewers may overlap this dog's

actions as an embarrassing human situation. As viewers, we interpret the juxtaposition in a more deep and human context. And at the end, Erwitt might laugh about all intelligent interpretations, and say that it is a just picture of dog crapping and a picture of a sign posted on a wall.

Elliott wrote that “Like Sammy [his dog’s name], dogs don’t mind being photographed in compromising situations, which is not to say that dogs are never self-conscious. In fact, a cruel person, or a photographer could easily embarrass them. But they are usually unaffected because of their innocence, and lack of guilt.” (Erwitt, *DogDogs*, np)

He also proves us that he is “serious enough to be not serious” (Holmes, 127) with many of his prints. In *Personal Exposures*, he juxtaposes “Epicenter, Alamogordo, New Mexico, 1965” and “Epicenter, Hiroshima, 1970.” In these two photos, we see the two areas where the atomic age was born. On the left, there is simply a sign out in the dessert that states “Ground Zero” marking the spot where the first atomic bomb was tested. On the right, we see Peace Park, in Hiroshima, where ewhere one of two bombs were dropped. He places these two photographs together to show the direct relationship between victor and defeated in Nuclear war. Both locations are attractions for different reasons. Both are “tourist spots.” And in both people take pictures as reminders of their visit here while missing the idea of how each of these two spaces were created. Erwitt appears to say to us that we all lose in wars and we all are victims of the war. The content in the two photos is that war is destructive and facinating at the same time. Yet Elliott Erwitt uses his magic to dilute the content and accentuates human silliness. After a while these two areas become a part of tourists’ attractions, and they, in turn, explain the human condition. Here the humor is a nervous humor. Again, Erwitt is creating a visual pun, but in this case, the serious tension of the subject on the left is relieved by the almost playful nature of the

subject on the right. Tourists, being tourists snap pictures attempting to capture a moment in time for themselves that will, ironically, never fade from human history.

Wilfrid Sheed, in the Introduction to Erwit's book, *Recent Developments*, writes about him, saying:

genuinely funny photos can be taken only by someone who lives in a funny world, and it is not surprising that Erwit reigns virtually alone in this field. Outside of the splendid Robert Doisneau in France, who relies more, as one must in France, on funny faces, on "character," I know of no contemporary who works consistently in the Comic Casual. Almost anyone else with Erwit's eyes would be tempted to turn to satire, a supposedly stronger art. But satire is actual gross and comparatively easy neat to pure humor. Erwit's bilious, goofy world is quite as biting as satire, but there is no point to detach from it, nothing to talk about. Critics prefer satire because it keeps them in business: you can talk all day about satire. Humor criticism requires an aesthetic. (Sheed, 6)

Erwit's work is sadly misunderstood and unpopular or unfamiliar in the American market, but well-known in outside the U.S. The secret of his popularity in foreign countries is that he knows well about the fact that different cultures react differently toward his works. (Danziger, 87)

Erwit's photos are sometimes visual puns, an interpretation of life and those things around us that we hardly notice and when we do it is because they are in an unexpected place. Erwit engages his viewers in an intricate visual conversation. This conversation forces us to think and be reminded of our own imperfect existence. To make this humor-interpretation ping-pong game happen successfully, Erwit's camera eyes become the viewers eyes. In his photos

Erwitt creates a feeling that it is we who are taking his pictures and looking thought the moment to recognize a part of ourselves in them. That part where the strange becomes familiar and the familiar takes on a strange twist. The scenes are so truthful and so real, that when we see them in real life they may have little meaning but when captured on film they take on a more intimate and nostalgic feel to them. Erwitt speaks to the child in all of us, and his photographs ask us to remember that life is really not that serious. In Erwitt's own words, "It seems to me that photography with a big "P" is getting more artsy-craftsy and I think it's unfortunate. I don't know many photographers and I'm not terribly interested in them. I find them terribly serious in a very boring way. I don't like to be serious." (Danziger, 94)

Notes

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