June 1989

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Recommended Citation
Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 25, no.2, June 1989, p.64-73

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The "Unmechanicalness" of Photography: Bernard Shaw's Activist Photographic Philosophy

by MELINDA BOYD PARSONS

ASH. L. MENCKEN said in a well-known remark of 1905, "Every habitual writer now before the public, from William Archer and James Huneker to 'Vox Populi' and 'An Old Subscriber,' has had his say about Shaw." Considering the eighty-odd years that have passed since, it is remarkable that there is anything left unsaid about Shaw, but such is the case with his involvement with the visual arts, about which very little has been written over the years. Yet not only did Shaw have a great deal to say about art, but he was an artist himself, practicing as a photographer for over fifty years. He began writing about the visual arts in his novels of the late 1870s and '80s, later expanding and refining his ideas in published and unpublished writings well into the nineteen-teens. Many scholars have dismissed the visual arts as peripheral to Shaw's major concern, the socialist reformation of industrial, capitalist Britain—or at least so we must assume if the lack of attention paid to his involvement with visual art is any indication. However, a careful examination of his writings suggests that the visual arts were far more central to his thinking on social reform, a position dependent primarily on his belief that the kinds of truth embodied in visual images—especially photographs—could be catalytic both in social reform and in the concomitant spiritual evolution that such reform would foster. The present essay, then, will focus on the inception of one of Shaw's most interesting concepts about art and photography: what he called the "unmechanicalness" of photography, which was the quality that made the medium suitable as an agent of social reform. We will look first at the development of this idea in his 1883 novel, An Unsocial Socialist,1 where although he did not use the term "unmechanical," the basic components of his theory were present. Then we will turn to his transmutation of the idea almost twenty years later in a radical article of 1902, "The Unmechanicalness of Photography."2

While Shaw's ideas about the artist as social reformer took shape near the end of the nineteenth century, their roots lay in a constellation of earlier aesthetic and social theories, including (though not limited to) the ideas of Blake, Shelley, Samuel Butler, Saint-Simon, Marx, Carlyle,

2. George Bernard Shaw, "The Unmechanicalness of Photography," The Amateur Photographer, 36 (9 October 1902), 286–89.
Ruskin, and Morris. In a sense, though, Shaw’s concepts occupy a pivotal position in nineteenth-century art theory, since not only do they summarize previous equations of art, truth, and nature; but they recast them in ways that anticipate certain twentieth-century developments of these ideas, particularly in photography, which Shaw perceived both as quintessentially truthful and quintessentially modern.

The notion that the artist could be a social reformer was in itself a relatively new and modern conception of artistic identity that had developed in Britain in the years after the French Revolution, inspired in part by admiration for revolutionary, republican ideals and in part by dismay at the increasingly apparent inequities of life in modern, industrialized, class-structured Britain. Shaw, in turn, enthusiastically embraced this earlier equation of art and reform. However, more than the wistfully viewed, mediaeval past that had inspired some of his compatriots, Shaw envisaged a mechanized, modern future—a fact that, as we shall see, was significant in shaping his ideas about photography.

Shaw’s theories about visual art can be sorted, for the sake of convenience, into two general categories (though it is important to note that in their practical application to society, the categories were integrally related). One of these categories concerned Shaw’s perception of the connections among art, nature, and truth, while the other comprised his interest in the dynamic relationship between art and society. In the first category, the most basic requisite was artistic realism, a “truth to nature” that was significant to Shaw in a social, reformatory context but also was freighted with metaphysical meaning. As he explained it, artists and the public had to learn to see and appreciate visual truthfulness because the clear-sighted perception of problems was absolutely necessary for beneficial social reform. But in addition the evolving divinity that Shaw felt was immanent in nature (and which he called the “Life Force”) could be revealed in art only by truthful visual congruence with nature and the world. Achieving such congruence, however, necessitated the absolute rejection of intellectual preconceptions or conventionalizing formulae regarding either subject matter or style, an idea at the heart of the Shavian theories of photography discussed in this essay—especially his characterization of photography as “unmechanical.”

In his other category, that concerning art and society, Shaw reiterated the belief of many progressive, nineteenth-century reformers that art has an ethical basis, and its value thus can be judged by its good or evil effects in society. In this view, then, the best art was that containing the largest number of what Shaw called “complex ideas,” the “most complex subject”


4. For an interesting recent study of Shaw’s metaphysics, see Warren Sylvester Smith, Bishop of Everywhere: Bernard Shaw and the Life Force (University Park and London: The Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1982).
being defined by Shaw in the 1880s as "man, under the most complex conditions—those of human personality in a society stratified into classes of various degrees of civilization." For society to develop artists intelligent enough to deal with such complexities, social conditions would have to change, since, under the conditions obtaining in capitalist, profit-motivated Britain, Shaw believed that only the "quick and thoughtless" artist could survive. The problem was, however, that for society to change, it needed the catalyst of exemplary art, the kind that only could be produced by the "intelligent" artists whom Shaw felt were missing in contemporary Britain, for the most part.

For Shaw, one way out of this double bind was photography. Unlike many of his nineteenth-century predecessors, Shaw was fascinated by technology, seeing it as "modern" because it freed humans from the drudgery of time-consuming, repetitive labor. He saw photography in this context, too, praising the medium as one that liberated artists from the time-consuming tasks of draughtsmanship and execution, allowing them to concentrate instead on developing "complex ideas" in their work. In addition, photography could undermine the consciously generated stylistic conventions and mannerisms so abhorred by Shaw, while it also seemed to circumvent the unavoidable tendency of the human hand and brain to generalize perceptual experience. These characteristics lent photography a realism and particularity—indeed, a truthfulness—that many nineteenth-century art critics condemned. Shaw, however, felt these qualities were ideally suited to a society that desperately needed the "improving" effects of an art form that was quick and inexpensive, yet full of complex ideas and—in his mind, at least—paradigmatically true to nature.

For Shaw, the most crucial and unique characteristic of photography, the one that allowed it to serve these roles in society, was what he called the "unmechanicalness" of the medium—surely one of his most paradoxical and controversial ideas about an already controversial art form. When he first announced this idea in a 1902 article titled "The Unmechanicalness of Photography," fellow critics and the public were stunned. How could a process so completely grounded in the mechanical operations of the camera be called "unmechanical"? The paradox seemed too far-fetched, and most people dismissed the article as untenable at best, a pointless joke at worst. Unfortunately, those few recent historians aware of Shaw's photographic writings have reacted similarly, not bothering to work out the ideas underlying Shaw's seemingly peculiar statements. But as Shavian scholars have long known, Shaw always said

6. Ibid.
7. See, for example, Helmut Gernsheim, "G. B. S. and Photography," Photographic Journal, 90 (January 1951), 31–36, in which I think Gernsheim misunderstood the physiological basis and metaphysical implications of Shaw's condemnation of the draughtsmanship processes.
what he meant—the problem for us is determining what he meant by what he said.¹⁸

So we must assume that for Shaw the term “unmechanical,” when applied to photography, had significant meaning. And, in fact, a study of Shaw’s writings about the visual arts in general reveals that his notion of photography’s unmechanicalness took shape in contradistinction to his perception of the “mechanicalness” of arts like painting or etching, at least as they were usually practiced. For Shaw a “mechanical” work of art was one created by following a pre-existing set of rules or conventions. Such mechanical procedures, not surprisingly, produced a subjective, generalized, conventionalized vision of the world. In addition, Shaw believed that most artistic media themselves were inherently conventional—that is, that visual conventions were unavoidably built into processes like drawing or etching. It was inevitable, for example, that an etcher could produce only a limited number of visual effects because the medium itself was capable only of those effects and no others. Thus many of the subtleties and details of the world were lost when it was rendered in a visual image in such a medium.⁹ One could say, therefore, that there was a certain “mechanical” quality in the production of etchings because the etcher was doomed to create similar visual effects over and over. For Shaw, then, “mechanical” art forms tended to reveal more about their own visual characteristics and the conventionalizing presence of the artist’s hand and eye than they did about the world that comprised their object. On the other hand, what Shaw defined as “unmechanical” processes followed no set rules for subject, style, or execution, concentrating instead on the objects of the world and trying to foster the self-revealment of those objects in all their vitalist particularity. Thus unmechanical art forms bypassed (at least as much as possible) conventionalizing tendencies, negating visible traces of process and maker to achieve a more complete and truthful congruence with the world. While Shaw recognized that even photography had some conventionalizing features (for example, the perspectival distortions of certain lenses or the absence of color in most turn-of-the-century processes), he nevertheless believed that sharp-focus, unmanipulated photographs came closer to his ideal of “unmechanicalness” than any other medium.

But why was unmechanicalness so important to Shaw? The answer, as suggested above, was rooted in his political beliefs and his search for the metaphysical structure of life, concerns reflected in his aesthetic theories. In fact, Shaw’s theories about photography seem to have taken shape ini-

¹⁸. This phenomenon was noted, for example, by Eric Bentley in his germinal study, Shaw: A Reconsideration (New York; amended Norfolk, Conn., 1957; London, 1967); and also in Elsie B. Adams’s excellent Bernard Shaw and the Aesthetes (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1971).

⁹. The stylistic and informational limitations of a medium have been called its “visual syntax” by print historian William Ivins in his classic 1953 study, Prints and Visual Communication. This idea was adapted to an analysis of photography somewhat later in William Crawford, The Keepers of Light: A History and Working Guide to Early Photographic Processes (Dobbs Ferry, N.Y.: Morgan and Morgan, 1979).
ially in conjunction with his conversion to socialism: when he first addressed himself to photography and its "truthfulness,"

in his 1883 novel *An Unsocial Socialist*, he was also reading Marx's *Das Kapital*, of which he later said, "Marx was a revelation. . . . [H]e opened my eyes to the facts of history and civilization, gave me an entirely fresh conception of the universe, provided me with a purpose and a mission in life." Hand in glove with this new mission to reform society went Shaw's conviction that the unconventionalism and visual truthfulness of photography, as well as its low cost and availability (relative to painting), made it an ideal tool for the socialist reformer.

These ideas emerged in nascent form in *An Unsocial Socialist*, a novel about the adventures of an unconventional young socialist, Sidney Trefusis. While the book included long passages of monologue concerning socialist theory, it also, on both the social and aesthetic levels, dealt with the basic opposition between natural (if unconventional) vitality and unnatural (conventional) morality. Trefusis, the most unconventional character, represented the kind of open-mindedness and unconditioned vision required at least to try to change society for the better; whereas Sir Charles Brandon and Chichester Erskine — respectively, a titled amateur artist and a Romantic poet — and some of the other characters represented the deadening rigidity of preset concepts and patterns of behavior. This dichotomy was reflected in their artistic preferences: Brandon and Erskine were connoisseurs of painting and etching, while Trefusis, characterized by Shaw as a man of "terrible truth-telling," found photography the only art form he could admire. In one telling scene in the book, the group of characters examined an etching, and Trefusis announced that its fuzzy lines seemed to him to have "no meaning," by which he meant that they possessed no significant congruence with nature. In other words, the kind of dark lines found in etchings or engravings are not found in nature — objects in our visual world are not surrounded by dark lines — and so the lines of an etching are merely conventions for representing reality. Not only are they not truthful, then, but they also could lead easily to the artist's falsification or idealization of the natural scene, since the draughtsmanship processes, by their very nature, are so subjective. Thus, in a later scene in the book, Trefusis invited the more conventional characters to come visit him at home and look at his albums of unidealized photographs, which, not surprisingly, comprised contrasting views of the living conditions of rich capitalists and poor laborers. After showing his visitors some images of his own wealthy father's home


11. This point of view was clearly expressed, for example, in Shaw's preface to his play *Misalliance*, 1910. See especially the section on "Art Teaching." The entire preface is reproduced in George Bernard Shaw, *The Complete Prefaces of Bernard Shaw* (London: Paul Hamlyn, 1965), pp. 45-105.


and pointing out how even a rich man's horses live better than many laborers, Trefusis then exhibited photographs of the living and working conditions of those employed by capitalists like his father:

Here is the exterior of a house...[and] a view of the best room in it. Photography gives you a fair idea of the broken flooring and patched windows, but you must imagine the dirt and the odour of the place. Some of the stains are weather stains, others came from smoke and filth. The landlord of the house holds it from a peer and lets it out in tenements. Three families occupied that room when I photographed it... Here is the cellar, let to a family for one-and-sixpence a week, and considered a bargain. The sun never shines there, of course. I took it by artificial light. You may add to the rent the cost of enough bad beer to make the tenant insensible to the filth of the place... Seven of the inhabitants of that house had worked for years in my father's mill. That is, they had created a considerable part of [his] vast sums of money... You can see how their condition contrasts with that of my father's horses...14

Photography thus allowed Trefusis to bring the evidential truth of certain socio-economic conditions to the attention of those (like Sir Charles Brandon and Chichester Erskine) who otherwise would never have seen it. And as Shaw and his character Trefusis thought, they had to believe it in a photograph; whereas had Trefusis shown them drawings, they might have assumed that the artist had altered the appearance of the scene to increase its persuasive power. Photography's truthfulness, though, at least in the 1880s, was for the most part unquestioned, and it certainly upset Trefusis's viewers—after a few more pictures, Brandon said, "I have no appetite for horrors. You really must not ask me to go through your collection. It is no doubt very interesting, but I can't stand it. Have you nothing pleasant to entertain me with?"15 And so Trefusis went on to another contrasting series of portraits, using photography's "truthfulness" to undercut his viewers' expectations about the "types" of people they were seeing:

Here are some portraits that will not harrow your feelings. This is my mother, a woman of good family, every inch a lady. Here is a Lancashire lass, the daughter of a common pitman. She has exactly the same physical characteristics as my well-born mother—the same small head, delicate features, and so forth; they might be sisters... [These similarities] illustrate the fact that Nature, even when perverted by generations of famine fever, ignores the [artificial] distinctions we set up between... men and women... This group, all tolerably intelligent and thoughtful-looking, are so-called enemies of society—Nihilists, Anarchists, Communards... and so on. These other poor devils, worried, stiff, strumous, awkward, vapid, and rather coarse... are European kings, queens, grand-dukes, and the like.16

Here Trefusis was using the unconventionalism and truthfulness of photographs—made, as he would later say, by a machine without opinions—to reveal the essential brotherhood and sisterhood of all humans; a condition that, had Brandon and Erskine looked at the actual people themselves rather than photographs, might not have been visible to them through their conventional, class-conditioned vision.

15. Ibid., p. 205.
16. Ibid., pp. 205-06.
Trefusis believed, then, that this “collection of facts,” as he called his photographs, had great persuasive power. In fact, the scene with the photographs ends with Trefusis’s stated conviction that he has changed Brandon’s way of viewing the world, even if Brandon himself is not aware of it yet. After noting that with these images, as well as in his actions, he was attacking the class structure of England, Trefusis countered Sir Charles’s remark that there was little use in attacking so monumental a phenomenon:

There is great use. You have a very different opinion of our boasted civilization now from that which you held when I broke your wall down and invited those Land Nationalization zealots to march across your pleasure ground. You have seen in my album something you had not seen an hour ago, and you are consequently not quite the same man you were an hour ago. My pictures stick in the mind longer than your scratchy etchings and the leaden paintings in which you fancy you see tender harmonies in grey.

The persuasive characteristics of Trefusis’s photographs lay—or so Shaw would say—in their concretization of so many “complex ideas.” Paradoxically, what lent photography the ability to embody these complexities was its apparently mindless, mechanical nature. Yet this paradox was resolved by Shaw in An Unsocial Socialist, even while so many of the social and political paradoxes posed in the book went unanswered. The key to the problem was Shaw’s realization that in photography, the creative and the executive parts of the artistic act could fruitfully be separated. With the photographic processes, as Trefusis explained in the novel, the labor of “drawing” was accomplished by the chemical action of light on film, thus leaving the photographer free to concentrate on developing the significant content of his or her work. This contrasted with the draughtsmanly processes in which the time required for an artist to perfect the requisite executive skills—things like anatomy, perspective, or shading techniques—was so great as to preclude the development of complex ideas. As Trefusis said, “...[I]n photography, the drawing counts for nothing, [so] the thought and judgement count for everything; whereas in the etching and daubing processes, where great manual skill is needed to produce anything the eye can endure, the execution counts for more than the thought.” Paradoxically, then, it was photography’s “mindless” mimetic capabilities that allowed its practitioners to exercise their own minds in the creation of their art.

But, even more paradoxically, it was photography’s mimetic capacity, which derived from the mechanical structure of the camera, that created what Shaw came to call the “unmechanicalness” of the medium. The basic ideas informing his concept of “unmechanicalness” can be found in An Unsocial Socialist, though in that volume Shaw had not called this quality

17. Ibid., p. 206.
18. Ibid., pp. 206–07.
19. Ibid., pp. 159–60.
20. Ibid., p. 159.
“unmechanicalness,” but rather the “unconventionalism” and “truthfulness” of photography. His ideas, as well as his terminology, however, were expanded by 1902 when he published his article, “The Unmechanicalness of Photography.” Not only had he taken up photography himself by then, lending conviction to his remarks on technical aspects of the medium, but he had also begun to address what might be called the “psychobiology” of art: that is, the way the mechanisms of the human body affect the production of art. Indeed, his definition of photography's unmechanicalness was now predicated on his view that the human body itself was more “mechanical” than the camera, in effect being strait-jacketed both by the conventionalizing tendencies of the brain and by the neuromuscular limitations of the body. In one passage, for example, Shaw contrasted the painter's unavoidable tendency to generalize his or her perceptions—a phenomenon psychologists call perceptual constancy—with the camera's ability to capture all the particularized nuances of an ever changing world. As he explained, there were many wrong-headed art critics who actually believed that the camera could give you only one constant version of a sitter, while the painter could give you a hundred or more. Nothing, however, could be further from the truth, a fact that Shaw went on to explain:

It is the draughtsman who can give you only one version of a sitter. Velasquez, with all his skill, had only one Philip [IV]; Vandyke had only one Charles [I]; Tenniel has only one Gladstone; Furniss only one Sir William Harcourt; and none of these are quite the real ones.22

The reason he felt these were not “the real ones” was that real people existed in a living, vitalist state that was always changing; and yet those subtle, moment-to-moment changes were not registered by what Shaw saw as the somewhat crude apparatus of the human hand and eye. The camera, however, as a more passive recording instrument, could give you as many versions of a sitter as that sitter had differing aspects, moods, and moments in time:

The camera, with one sitter, will give you authentic portraits of at least six apparently different persons and characters. Even when the photographer aims at reproducing a favourite aspect of a favourite sitter, as all artist-photographers are apt to do, each photograph differs more subtly from the other than Velasquez's Philip in his prime differs from his Philip in his age.23

In other words, what Shaw was evoking here was the tendency of the human brain to generalize the many subtle variations in a group of perceptions, distilling them down to one characteristic, constant image. This tendency toward constancy was so strong, in fact, that even when one perceptual stimulus differed substantially from another, the artist's

21. Shaw took up photography in 1898 as he was recovering from a breakdown brought on by overwork.
23. Ibid.
brain registered only that characteristic impression of the object that it had built up through repeated exposure to that object. Thus Velasquez's paintings of Philip resembled each other more than they resembled the living Philip at the particular times during which the paintings were made. The phenomenon was summed up by Shaw in some further remarks:

The painter sees nothing in the sitter but his opinion of him: the camera has no opinions: it has only a lens and a retina. One reply to this is obvious. It is, that if I only knew how stupid a painter can be, I would admit that many painters have no opinions, no mind, nothing but an eye and a hand. Granted; but the camera has an eye without a hand; and that is how it beats even the stupidest painter. The hand of the painter is incurably mechanical: his technique is incurably artificial. Just as the historian has a handwriting which remains the same whether he is chronicling Elizabeth or Mary, so the painter has a handdrawing which remains the same, no matter how widely his subjects vary. And it is because the camera is independent of this handdrawing and this technique that a photograph is so much less hampered by mechanical considerations, so much more responsive to the artist’s feeling, than a design. It gives you a direct picture where the pencil gives you primarily a drawing.24

This discussion of the limitations of the human body and brain also led Shaw into some further speculation and comment on the camera in relation to the conventionalism of consciously developed stylistic mannerisms, a conventionalism fostered both by the academic teaching of art and by the connoisseurship of style practiced so widely in England and on the continent:

[The camera] evades the clumsy tyranny of the hand, and so eliminates that curious element of monstrosity which we call the style or mannerism of the painter . . . . It also evades the connoisseurship in these [stylistic] deformities which is the stock-in-trade of many critics . . . . [Stylistic] virtuosity in the artist, [by its very nature,] calls for its corresponding connoisseurship in the critic; and the result is that fine art becomes a game of skill in which the original object of the skill [i.e., the world] is constantly being lost sight of; so that the genuinely original men who recall this object by periodical “returns to nature” are vehemently abused and ridiculed, not because their works are not like nature, but because they are not like pictures.25

This final distinction, that between the vitalism of nature and the deadening conventionalism of “pictures” (i.e., paintings, drawings, etchings, etc.) is what relates Shaw’s thoughts on the unmechanicalness of photography to his larger metaphysical theories. Of the several basic themes underlying all Shaw’s work—fiction, drama, or criticism—none was more important than his emphatic contrast between the conventional and the natural. In Shaw’s mind, conventionalism was deadening because it stressed adherence to already existing rules or conditions. Whether it involved thought processes, behavioral patterns, or artistic styles, conventionalism thus negated any possibility of growth or change. For Shaw, however, the potential for growth and change was a metaphysical requisite, since his religious speculations were predicated on a powerful “Life Force” impelling living beings into a continual, yet unpredictable,

24. Ibid.
25. Ibid., pp. 286, 288.
spiritual and intellectual evolution. Thus the Life Force could only be manifested fully through the most unconventional people—those whose open-mindedness made them receptive to all the strangeness and novelty of the paths the Life Force was forging into the unknown future.

Similarly, Shaw believed that the Life Force could manifest itself in the arts. In his play *Man and Superman*, for example, Shaw had noted that the genius was an unconventional person who was able to build up “an intellectual consciousness of [Nature’s] own instinctive purpose.” Unconventionalism thus was inextricably linked in Shaw’s mind with organic nature—the “unmechanical”—just as conventionalism was “incurably artificial” and “mechanical.” It was the job of the artist-genius, Shaw wrote, to try to perceive and express the purposes of the Life Force, discerning “the distant light of a new age” and focusing it in the “magic glass of his artwork,” whence it could be “flashed back from that into the eyes of the common man.” Thus the “artist-prophet” could foster the changes in social and political structure that would lead the world into that new age, the new age that was the ultimate goal of the Life Force.

Needless to say, then, the most effective “magic glass” was that which was the most natural and “unmechanical,” since the Life Force was an evolutionary, future-oriented power that could never be expressed in formulaic, conventional styles, just as it could not be fully expressed through the limited perceptual constancies of human vision. The distant light of the new age had to be matched by an equally new, modern medium; and for Shaw the most natural, unmechanical, truthful medium was that most “mechanical” of instruments, the camera. That he was consciously aware of his equation between the unmechanicalness of photography and the revealment of organic nature as a tool of the Life Force was indicated in one further comment in “The Unmechanicalness of Photography”:

Now if it could be proved against the camera that its lines were ruled and its curves struck with a compass, there would be some sense in the parrot cries of mechanicalness. The truth is that it is as much less mechanical than the hand, as the hand is less mechanical than the compass. The hand, striking a curve with its fingers from the pivot of the wrist or shoulder, is still a compass, differing from the brass one only in the number of movements of which it is capable. Not even when it is the hand of a [Hans] Memling can it strike a curve quite such as flesh or flower reaches by its growth; and the student of pictures who has never felt this incompatibility between the inevitable laws of the motion of a set of levers and the perfectly truthful representation of the forms produced by growth, will never be a critic of photography.

Shaw had found his magic glass.