

Useless Reportage - Notes on Helen Levitt's *In the Street*

Roy Arden

Helen Levitt's *In the Street* is a non-narrative, short film by a photographer, as such it is a very rare bird. There are few entries in this category and they have largely gone unnoticed as anomalies, or unsuccessful experiments. By 1945, when Levitt, her friend Janice Loeb, and the writer James Agee began filming in the streets of Spanish Harlem, their subject had already been extensively mined by Levitt in still photographs revered today as pioneering masterpieces of lyric street photography. The opening credits reveal that Levitt is not the sole author of *In The Street* as Loeb & Agee have been given equal billing. Indeed, Levitt was only present for a portion of the filming. Yet the film is habitually referred to as hers, no doubt in recognition of her claim to the subject matter as 'staked out' in her earlier photos. Levitt was drawn to the neighbourhood because of its lively and unguarded street life.

*It was a good neighborhood for taking pictures in those days, because that was before television,... There was a lot happening. And the older people would be sitting out on the stoops because of the heat. This was... in the late '30s, so those neighborhoods were very active.*¹

Levitt's photographs were made with a Leica camera fitted with a right-angle periscopic attachment or *winkelsucher*, this device allowed her to appear to be photographing what was before her while actually capturing what was beside her. The *winkelsucher* bought her the time to wait until her unwitting subjects arranged themselves into compelling tableaux. Whereas her photographs appear as poetic compositions made in a timeless limbo, the film is a series of roughly cut passages from historical time's relentless progress. In contrast to Levitt's studied photographs, the movie camera of *In The Street* could only reactively track the subjects - it also became a player in the drama itself, provoking events as much as recording them.

The very first frames of *In The Street* show a boy on a bicycle following a wagon with large spoked wheels, the revolving wheels announce that the camera is rolling. The editing of the film is basic, Levitt has simply cobbled together the best bits of footage, the clips where something 'interesting' has taken place. Where there are bits that follow an action such as an altercation and its aftermath, these have been kept in sequence. Much of the action seems to have been shot on a Halloween day. The children are adorned in meagre costumes, an old dress for a girl to become a gypsy or a penciled moustache for a pre-adolescent pirate. Levitt often made still photos of children in Halloween garb and was clearly drawn to their carnivalesque aspect. Yet these images in her photographs or films don't have any more power or effect than the others shot on regular days. It would seem that photography itself is surreal enough - in it's magical manifestation of a presence in absence.

No live sound was recorded for *In The Street* - one can only assume because of financial or technical limitations. It is an open question as to how sound might have changed the nature of the film. Levitt later added a piano soundtrack by Arthur Kleiner which is tasteful and tries to follow or complement the changing tempo of the film. Yet it's addition seems a recourse to convention rather than a necessity and the film is finally better served by silence.

The street here is a common area not just to pass through but in which to live out all of life's aspects. The different races and nationalities are here equalised, if not quite united in poverty, forced to interact while they escape the heat or dead

air of their tenement apartments. Weegee captured these same conditions in many of his abrupt photos and must have been an influence on Levitt's choice of subjects, if not her choice of style. The photographic depiction of "street characters" extends back to Europe and England and the very beginnings of the medium. John Thomson's photos of *Street Life in London* (1877–78) are of special significance. However, Levitt's *In The Street* is also part of a distinctly American tradition. There, the epic of mass immigration and its consequence were photographed by social documentarians like Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine and later taken up by photographers associated with the Works Progress Administration. A legion of cameras was turned on the plight of immigrants and poor Americans, especially in New York City. When Levitt began photographing, she was driven by her social conscience. She found brief employment with the W.P.A. and met many other photographers including Walker Evans and his writer friend, James Agee - both of whom encouraged her. Levitt never met Ben Shahn but was influenced by his winkelsucher street shots. It was her meeting with Cartier-Bresson however, that confirmed her stylistic direction:

*And I decided I should take pictures of working class people and contribute to the movements,... Whatever movements there were - Socialism, Communism, whatever was happening. And then I saw pictures of Cartier Bresson, and realized that photography could be an art - and that made me ambitious.*²

Levitt developed Cartier-Bresson's articulation of 'the decisive moment' more than any other photographer of the time. Although she mainly pictured children, it is clear both from the photographs and interviews, that she didn't especially like children but instead saw them as people who were more accessible and less guarded than adults. According to Agee's introduction to *In the Street*; "The streets of the poor quarters of great cities are above all, a theatre and a battleground." If in the film the streets seem to be mostly battleground, her photographs construe it more as a theatre. Levitt was after the epiphanic universal that might emerge from the quotidian. This resulted in a sentimentality in the photographs that the film largely managed to avoid.

In the Street is also largely free of the kind of rhetoric associated with the social documentary or photojournalism. Instead it is a rare piece of 'useless' reportage and so can be nothing other than art. It is probably Walker Evans, more than any other artist, who appropriated reportage for photography as modern art. Evans began his own career with experiments that reflected the reigning styles of Pictorialism. However, he quickly rejected those models for a dispassionate Realism inspired by Flaubert and Atget among others. As with Walker Evans' photographs of the Depression, which have been 'shanghaied' for myriad causes over the years, *In The Street*, could likewise be recruited for useful purposes. A quick search on the Web reveals that Levitt's film is currently being shown by the Union Settlement Association as part of a program at the Museum of the City of New York to celebrate the history of East Harlem. Because of the indexical aspect of film and photography it is often possible to appropriate such works, intended as autonomous art, into the service of non-art institutions.

While writing this, I had a video of the film playing continuously. My television began to seem like some visual wormhole to another world. If this was an article on a narrative film, it would have to include a synopsis of the story. Instead, I can only produce a clumsy list of descriptions of those vignettes which particularly haunted me: A boy of about four years, proudly wearing an old dress first tenderly kisses and then cold-cocks a little girl; a girl of perhaps nine years dressed as a gypsy, really looks like a little gypsy; an opened fire hydrant provides refreshment for a mob of children - and I wonder if this image was already a cliché or if this film was part of the cliché's construction; world weary, heavy set women bulging with the effects of starchy diets, in cheap floral prints and cigar chomping men in fedoras and suspenders, pants pulled up to their chests; the lone person in the film who appears to have any money - a vulgar woman in fur and gloves, captured like the victim of a George Grosz caricature picking her teeth in the cruel light of day; a gargoyle-child with nose pressed against a window licking the dirty glass without a shred of self-consciousness; an old woman with a skull for a face, standing like a petrified mummy disinterred from the catacombs of Palermo; a stupid game - perhaps a now forgotten Halloween ritual, where boys fill old nylons with a white powder (perhaps chalk or flour?), and whale on each other to see who will lose by ending covered in white, their weapons are of course more dangerous than they realize, and

soon there are bruised heads and a teary-eyed loser - traumatized more by the indignity than the physical pain, the game reaches an internecine frenzy where clouds of white explode in a spectacular image of war; finally a woman in an apron breaks up the game; a black boy in a white pointy hat that eerily resembles a Klansman's hood; blocks of ice for sale guarded by a man in a hat, he casually kicks at a boy who dares get too close; a group of girls in their mother's old dresses dancing like witches in a Goya painting; the archaic look of all the handmade, pre-Disney Halloween masks; the little boy in the dress again, doing a maniacal St. Vitus dance; gaggles of kids vying to have their portrait made by the camera, one small black boy with eyes large as golf balls staring into the lens as though there was someone inside the camera; and finally, a woman sitting in a window, smoking, depressed.

If the overlong list of descriptions above seems stylistically problematic, it is also more appropriate to an account of *In The Street* than the rest of this essay. The events in the film are presented to be looked at rather than pressed into service for any other purpose. *In The Street* is reportage as art. It reports the facts, but for their useless beauty above all. While it could be argued that the film tells us how working class residents of Spanish Harlem lived in the 30's and 40's - how they looked and behaved, the addition of expository narration could have told us so much more. Statistics and other facts could have helped us put what we see into context and multiplied the use-value of the film. The absence of narration or other texts proves the artist's intent that we are intended to enjoy the film as a collection of beautiful appearances.

In The Street has been cited by Stan Brakhage among others, as an influence on the development of independent film of the 60's and 70's. The early films of Warhol also share the approach of 'useless reportage' that marks this tendency. The tradition that artists like Levitt, Warhol and Brakhage represent avoided both the documentary and narrative genres which were seen as instrumental or functional forms. A look around at current media art would suggest that it could benefit from a knowledge and understanding of this tradition.

Footnotes

- 1 excerpted from "Helen Levitt's Indelible Eye - Photographer Captures the Lost Outdoor Life of New York City" an interview with Helen Levitt by Melissa Block, National Public Radio, Washington D.C. (2002)
- 2 *ibid.*