

Dark Social Setting

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The social order is a complex organism that knows different conditions of aggregation and is therefore as incalculable as an individual's mood swings. We are determined by memories and impulses, drives and fears, and we are constantly walking the tightrope between our desires and the lowlands of reality, of which we have only a partial overview and which we cannot completely plan. We are often enough pulled into a whirlpool of emotions and rolled over by unexpected facts. Because just as little as the individual decides in favor of him- or herself in the individual case and is capable of effectively determining all of the consequences of his or her actions, neither does the close-meshed network of agreements and guidelines function at the social level. While there may be a differentiated system of socially defined rules and policies, roles and functions, from time to time, public order nevertheless collapses and rears its ugly head, resulting in a loss of control, confusion, and a state of emergency. A thin layer of varnish separates human beings from calamity and chaos, allows them to walk over thin ice and hope they do not break through. Yet there is evolution and progress; there is room for maneuver and opportunity for gaining insight. What holds true for the individual also holds true for society in general, whose premises are marked in equal measure by individuals and ideologies. The enlightened social construction of democracy and pluralism promises diversity of expression, moral values, freedom, and security through one's self-concept, self-interest, and (self-) control. And yet we remain caught between the poles of our

own views, our precipices and hopes, and the demands of the social order, which in its laws and administrative explanations is frequently static and justifiable; in its interpretation, however, it is unpredictable and risky. These contradictory relations characterize sociology and psychology alike.

This basic constellation and the resulting conflict can be found in Clare Strand's work. In the *Gone Astray Portraits* we see people who appear to be lost and confused. They seem to be out of place in the photographs taken against a background that affords a romantic but artificial view of an idyllic, painted forest. For one thing, this approach has been borrowed from the nineteenth century—it therefore stems from a period during which the medium of photography was still emancipating and defining itself with respect to the forms of depiction and representational models of conventional portraiture. For another, removing the protagonists from their contemporary urban environment reduces them to their clothes and their pose, which makes them appear rather helpless and forlorn. Taken out of their own time and their urban sphere of activity, one's glance falls on a modern human being who is defined by accessories but whose social status and role can hardly be fathomed. One is supposedly representing oneself—but not society, the public spirit, or a specific social role. Clare Strand avails herself of complex references when she stages her protagonists in front of a screen with a painted forest and panoramic scene. For what we today view as universally valid emerged as early as the nineteenth century: mass urban societies and citified jungles with sharp social contrasts that not lastly could be clearly linked to someone's outward appearance: at the time, working class meant gloomy rear-courtyard architecture and torn clothes, while the upper class stood out due to their top hats, city mansions, and country style. The subjects in Clare

Strand's photographs seem to be uprooted and out of place against the romantic, idyllic natural background. A portrait depicting and documenting someone's social status has given way to an interchangeable habitus of alienation. In his quest for ideal types of roles and spaces, the only thing that occurs to a city dweller is the distorted notion of nature and romanticism. But one can hardly escape abysmal human dispositions in nature. It is only consistent when Clare Strand shows the dark side of the city and the people who live there. In *Gone Astray Details*, the background is made up of dark, damp walls, empty spaces, and naked asphalt—everything seems black and finite. The protagonists do not walk, they crawl along walled boundaries, stand in concrete nothingness, lead their children through the darkness on dog leashes. The experience of nature has been reduced to a plastic-bag format and shows comic-book-style butterflies. Spirituality can only be had as the occult, religiously and magically distorted in the form of a Ouija board or a divining rod. But the supposedly transcendental experience does not shed any light on the events—on the contrary, one has the feeling that the darkness has increased.

There is no better way to describe the conflict of exclusion and participation, the ability to perceive and being at the mercy of someone or something. Social and subjective realities are a conglomerate of the palpable and the invisible, concrete facts and zero insight. It is only a mythical primeval memory that feeds a kind of basic trust in the disparate consciousness of these modern human beings. One of the characteristics of a life molded by civilization and culture is fear, which while it can follow an instinctive will to survive, ultimately manifests in very abstract forms of spheres of activity, cognizance, and life schemes that are extended almost ad infinitum. Alienation and fear also mean the loss of

meaningful or at least comprehensible relations, the fundamental shifting and weighting of meaning and interpretation. Happiness and danger lose their commensurability and real value if they are measured against the parameters of a neurotic consciousness. Neurosis, however, is not only individual, it is also always mediated by society.

In *Signs of a Struggle*, we are confronted with unleashed drives in the form of crime-scene photographs. The intact world of middle-class hope is shattered by a crime and clearly marks the transgression of a boundary that shows itself in murder and manslaughter. However, Clare Strand does not reproduce the occurrence itself, neither does she show victims or perpetrators. By means of reconstructions, analyses, marking, and numbering at the crime scene, investigators attempt to understand a crime and find evidence. Photography serves as a medium for documenting what has occurred and preserving evidence. By using these types of images, Clare Strand is not addressing a particular crime, but crime in general. Above all, however, the contrast between emotions, aggressions, and homicidal egoism on the one hand, and a technically instrumental consciousness on the other. For while the police may have a whole reservoir of effective investigation methods at their disposal, which in many cases would not be possible without the impact of science, they cannot prevent crimes but only clear them up after they occur. The conflict between a world that is controlled and oriented toward norms and values and the incursion of regressive horror and violence expresses itself in this field of tension.

In *Unseen Agents*, Clare Strand raises the narrative and aesthetic possibilities into surreal and metaphorical visual spaces; however, she keeps both feet on the ground of social reality. The possibilities of gaining insight by means of scientific methods, categorization

models, test arrangements, and the attribution of roles are the catchwords for a series of tests beyond known coordinates and taxonomies. The faces of young women appear from behind milky veils. Here, Clare Strand is addressing the quality of photographic reproductions and counters their ostensibly precise and unmistakable view of reality. Things that convey a sense of clarity are possibly the result of a conscious obscuration or deception. To trust photography means becoming involved in interpretations and valuing fragments as a whole. The focus of photography is always pointed, and in this constriction it is always blunt and unclear in equal shares. These features may possibly also be related to scientific and technical explanatory models or to their forms of representation. But not only can science fall under suspicion of presenting falsehoods and distortions as the irrevocable truth; the attribution of roles and functions within a society can be deformed in such a way that a critical look discloses them. It is therefore no coincidence that young women are the object of analysis in Strand's apparently odd scenarios. From the time one is a child and adolescent, attributions and assignments are made for every kind of behavior and self-concept. It is perhaps during puberty that one has the first opportunity to disagree and behave in a nonconformist way. For women, the distorted social form of sexuality—from the image of the sacrificing mother to the femme fatale, from the seductive intriguer to the seducible airhead—holds a whole kaleidoscope of stereotypes and transformations. One probably needs surreal powers and fantasies, such as those that find expression in *Unseen Agents*, in order to face these solidified and galling notions, because projection and assertion always walk hand in hand over the social landscape.

As a medium, photography is firmly anchored in everyday life. The versatility of its expressiveness and uses in the private as well as the professional sphere is enormous and

cannot be compared with any other form of pictorial representation. Photography is interpreted both as an objective and a subjective medium. Photographs stand for documentary precision *and* the possibility of creating imaginary pictorial spaces with a high degree of abstraction. Every photograph is interpreted and used according to its context of origin and use. If the contexts are exchanged, new references and propositions emerge. Clare Strand possesses the ability to mix different contexts and levels of meaning and succeeds in presenting a test arrangement that invariably causes us to cast doubt on photography and the apparently inescapable premises of reality in equal measure.

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