

PHOTOGRAPHY AS AN ELEGY: SOLITUDE AND ISOLATION

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Abstract – Photography, like all art, is subjective. Critics view photography to find meaning through the multiple implications they make from the subjects that appear, lighting used, etc. However, photography maintains an objectivity as well in its ability to take a moment out of time itself, a form of elegy. This research paper expands on this idea through examination of two photographs, Eliot Porter's Red Tree Near Cades Cove, Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Tennessee and my Man in Nature. Through Susan Sontag's lens of photography as elegy, I investigate the themes of solitude in nature and isolation from it by analyzing the two photo's subjects, color, and lighting. I end with a call to action for a reexamination of humanity's relationship with nature through the photographic medium in an attempt not only to reconnect with the natural world but also to mitigate the effects of climate change.

Key Words – Photography, Elegy, Eliot Porter, Susan Sontag

INTRODUCTION

Photography. A simple image or “copy” of our world can be created with the effortless press of a button. Nevertheless, what some may see as an elementary process is a grand form of art with the ability to present innovative physical, metaphorical, and metaphysical perspectives [1]. Presenting photography as a true form of art may require a reexamination of the definition of art. To many, art is something pleasing to the eye, something that must send a deep or underlying message to the audience. However, this definition is insufficient and prescriptivist. Instead, art is subjective [2]. It is like water: its form is not predetermined, but rather is shaped by the container that the individual places it in.

Yet seemingly contradicting this subjectivity, an objectivity of photography exists in its “elegiac” nature, as described by Susan Sontag [3]. The same press of a button that captures perspectives simultaneously “freezes” time itself to store the fleeting moment on a chip or on film, essentially “killing” or “removing” the present [3]. This death allows the photographer to reshape and change the meaning of the photograph itself, fundamentally altering the audience's percept. As photographs isolate specific instances of time from linearity, they are “memento mori”; they secure

a slice of reality like one would preserve a butterfly for their collection [4].

Viewed as elegy, nature photography above all other forms reveals the fragility of life. Nature photographers work to bring awareness to the solace offered by the natural world as justification for the responsibility humans have to maintain it [5]. The logic of the nature photographer is that if people witness the value and serenity of nature, they will want to preserve it. Unfortunately, their efforts are failing. Climate catastrophe appears inevitable, and the environments once captured in their photos disappear as days pass. In essence, their solitude is replaced with isolation, a separation of man from nature. Yet in taking a picture of this solitude, photographers execute solitude itself, leaving only isolation in its stead. One can never experience the joy the photographer felt when capturing the image; they can only reflect on the impossibility of experiencing it. It is a dead moment. To both reveal the death of solitude shown in Eliot Porter's 1967 *Red Tree Near Cades Cove, Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Tennessee* and to reaffirm the isolation of modernity, I submit my 2020 *Man in Nature* [6, 7].

Most recognizable from his success with the Sierra Club and his pioneering use of Kodachrome film, Porter was one of the most influential photographers to ever hold a camera - especially in the environmentalist world [3]. Trained as a scientist, his unique take on nature photography helped to shape narratives around photography's role in preserving nature [5]. His *Red Tree*, as seen in Figure 1, attempts to emphasize the importance of solitude found through nature in its subject, color, and lighting techniques, while my *Man in Nature*, Figure 2, using similar techniques, highlights man's increasing distance from nature and isolation resulting from the use of machines as a substitute for the natural world and the very elegiac nature of photography itself. These two works, through subtle but coherent differences, ultimately express a shift in focus from solitude to isolation.

In this paper, I define solitude as the healing, reflective experience of communing with nature, whereas isolation define as the separation of man from nature and subsequent loneliness and depression resulting from said separation.



FIGURE 1: ELIOT PORTER, *RED TREE NEAR CADES COVE, GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK, TENNESSEE*. 1967.



FIGURE 2: Yuta Namba, *Man in Nature*. 2020.

ANALYSIS OF RED TREE

Red Tree celebrates solitude in its subject; the image focuses on a sole, red tree against a background of its green cousins. Porter achieves this focus not only through the contrast of foreground and background, but also by centering it. The viewer sees no human, nor any evidence of human interaction or manipulation; instead, they witness only the natural world. The viewer is aware that the photograph has to be taken by someone, but the lack of human interference frames the photographer as “an acute but non-interfering observer” [4]. The trees in the background of this photo are compressed together, with only dead leaves on their thin branches, yet they do not suggest sadness or loneliness. Their distance from the red tree is what allows it to live; were they to invade its space and break the sanctity of this solitude, the red tree would lack the room it needs to grow. Porter’s visual claim of solitude highlights the beauty of the red tree, the purity of the deep level of reflection and whole human experience only accessible through solitude in nature.

Porter’s use of color in *Red Tree* further showcases the theme of solitude in nature. The red leaves of the central tree contrast sharply with the bluish green of those in the background, yet the red tree is not isolated. It is taking part in the larger cycle of life; its red leaves will soon fade to brown and fall. In this sense, the red Porter has captured is a reminder to the audience of the tree’s “mortality” [4]. The trees around it gradually fade into blackness, suggesting the eternal nature of this cycle and celebrating the solitude of this tree. This solitude does not mean that the subject must exist outside of all external influence; that would be impossible in a universe as intimately connected as our own. However, this intricate play of red, green, and black shows how in the natural world one can exist concurrently in the solace of independence and interconnection.

Similarly, Porter uses lighting in innovative ways to emphasize the solitude of *Red Tree*. Even at first viewing, the lighting between the background and foreground heavily contrasts. The background is dark, while the subject in the foreground is lit. This lighting contrast instantly pushes the audience’s attention toward the subject, which as noted above, fosters feelings of solitude. The lighting is also symbolic: it is from the natural light source (the sun) that the red tree flourishes. Porter’s choice to use natural lighting further distances human interference from the solitude of nature. He could have chosen to use artificial bulbs and flashes, but these would have detracted from the sanctity of the natural experience. To find solace, humans need bring nothing of their own into the natural world; they must simply take in its glory and look at it with “nostalgia” [4].

ANALYSIS OF MAN IN NATURE

However, it is exactly this “nostalgia” that is at the root of humanity’s seemingly irreparable rift from nature: “Nature has become more a subject for nostalgia and

indignation than an object of contemplation” [4]. Humans no longer feel a direct connection with nature and are isolated from it. *Man in Nature* first reveals this isolation through its subject. Instead of the natural symbol of the red tree, *Man in Nature* focuses on a man. Humanity has gone beyond the role of observer and has usurped the center, both pictorially and in a larger metaphorical sense. He has completely isolated himself from nature, killing it away with the artificiality of the man-made devices that surround him. While *Red Tree* approaches the main subject from an upward angle, suggesting the limitless growth of solitude, *Man in Nature* looks down upon the subject, crushing him with the weight of his isolation. This weight is further felt in his collapsed neck; his isolation physically forces him to cower beneath his own creations.

Color in *Man in Nature* further emphasizes this isolation. Whereas the main subject of *Red Tree* glowed a glorious red, the man in this photo is awash in blackness. Like in *Red Tree*, this blackness suggests eternity, but it differs from the celebratory eternal cycle of life. It is the eternity of loneliness, a blackness of the soul. Man has isolated himself from nature and no longer feels its calming effects; the subject and the viewer in turn become “uninvolved consumers” of the artificial world and take no time for peace and reflection [3]. Yes, the monitors on either side of the subject’s head project color, but they are the unnatural hues of a computer-generated world, one which illuminates human loneliness.

The very lighting of *Man in Nature* suggests isolation. Instead of the life-giving light source of *Red Tree*, this photo is lit only by computer screens. Beyond them, the viewer sees only darkness. Without his technology, man disappears, but it is this same technology which isolates him. It is not a nourishing light like the sun, and nothing organic exists around the subject to feed him. The artificial light is the eternal moon eclipsing the subject’s sun; without its light, he will die. These negative connotations are embodied in the framing of the subject. The subject is literally a negative; the backlighting of the photo traces an outline around him. This negative status is symbolic of the broader role his distancing from nature has caused in his life, and it connotes sorrow and misery.

CONCLUSION

Although both of these works have created a distinctly contrasting theme, both *Red Tree* and *Man in Nature* have separated human from nature. *Red Tree* represents humans finding solitude not for themselves, but rather in nature. Likewise, *Man in Nature* represents how humans have completely separated from nature, replacing it with machines. Yet, this theme is not only concurrent in these two photographic works, but is now a part of human nature as well. Though we view our ancient ancestors as part of the natural world, modern humans view themselves as a distinct race. *Red Tree* reminds us of a reality we will never again experience, and *Man in Nature* reflects our present

predicament. This may explain the beauty humanity sees in photography, as its elegiac nature is relatable to our own.

Porter wrote in his first widely-distributed book that “in wildness is the preservation of the world” [8]. As he continued working in nature photography, he saw the degradation of this wildness and “began to appreciate the terrible consequence of this... unnecessary destruction of the natural environment” [8]. Though climate change has accelerated and humans feel less and less attached to nature, photography’s elegiac quality reveals to us that we do not need to lose hope yet; we must simply reexamine our relationship with nature. The idea of human and nature is a misnomer: we are a part of the natural world, as is everything else on this Earth.

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