

# Books

**A CENTURY OF JAPANESE PHOTOGRAPHY**  
by Japan Photographers Association  
(English edition edited by John W. Dower)  
(Pantheon, 385 pp., \$47.50)

**NICARAGUA: JUNE 1978-JULY 1979**  
by Susan Meiselas  
(edited with Claire Rosenberg)  
Pantheon, 128 pp., \$22.95/11.95)

**VISIONS OF CHINA**  
photographs by Marc Riboud, 1957-1980  
(Pantheon, 112 pp., \$30.00)

Henry Holmes Smith

Most costly books of photography are fated to grace coffee tables and receive only the casual glance of someone waiting for the drinks to be mixed. Certainly the three under review deserve better, though what they receive may be something else again.

The problem is that few people think the study of a picture, and a photograph in particular, takes any time at all. But a good photograph with aesthetic possibilities or quantities of information to impart can be savored as one does good food, a fine wine, or someone of intelligence, beauty, and grace. Not many know what they are missing when it comes to relishing photographs.

The study of pictures entails responsibility on the viewer's part: careful identification of objects and their state or condition; drawing inferences from posture, position, expression, relationship; appreciating the implications of style or convention; and finally, applying personal knowledge and experience to the subject, the setting, the event. Surely such an exercise consumes more energy than many people care to give it, but the rewards can be many.

In providing examples of the applied and artistic photography practiced in Japan, *A Century of Japanese Photography* is illuminating for anyone who is interested in the assimilation of twentieth-century Western conventions of art by another culture (and vice versa). Professor John W. Dower's excellent introduction helps harmonize the Western vision imposed by the camera lens with Oriental conventions of behavior, seeing, and depiction. The occa-

sional photograph in which Japanese conventions of depiction coincide with nature's own design are found throughout the section of art photography. Certain plates demonstrate the influence of Japan on the West via France in the late nineteenth century; camera composition felt the impact for more than a generation, as did printmaking and painting prior to 1900. In other plates we note the contrast between this earlier influence and the conventions of primitive or naive artists that were adopted by some photographers of the 1920s. Many of the possibilities for modifying images made with sharp lens and camera were also adopted in Japan as pictorial photography ricocheted around the world: soft focus, paper negative, gum and oil printing, textured photographic papers, and the like. What they offered in the way of novel effects were eagerly taken up, only to be abandoned with the weakening of their ability to satisfy the aesthetic requirements of a time or place.

Another section shows the devices that were first viewed after World War I: combinations of photographic fragments; multiple exposures or the combined printing of negatives; and close-ups producing strong, simple geometric compositions. These conventions, it would appear, came to Japan some ten years or so after they made their appearance in Western Europe. With a few notable exceptions among advertising illustrators, these same effects were not widely published in the United States during those same years.

The book includes plenty of the sort of pictures that have been called repor-

tage. Noteworthy are those that remind us that destruction of human life is not the prerogative of human beings alone, as in the great Kanto earthquake of 1923, when 38,000 people in a single district were burned to death. It is sobering and unpleasant to compare the effects of this natural disaster with the effects of acts of war in Manchuria and Korea in the 1930s by the Japanese and of the fire bombing and then atom bombing of the Japanese mainland by the U.S. Air Force. In two particular plates the attitude and condition of the bodies remind the viewer of the bodies found in the ash-filled dwellings of Pompei. If this is nature's way of saying "Don't do it," it is obvious we refuse to learn. An illuminating book, and humbling as well.

In *Nicaragua*, seventy-one carefully printed color pictures taken during the revolutionary period 1978-79 intermingle images of the living and the dead, much as the somber and technically less perfect black and white pictures from Japan. It is difficult to determine whether the clarity of these photographs brings the horror nearer or puts it at a farther remove. Whatever one's judgment on that score, the progression of pictures here is brilliant, particularly plates 5, 7, 8, 13, 14, 17, 23, 28, 35, and 40. In peace and war it is left to the living to dispose of the corpses; yet only in war do we experience a sort of time-lapse version of life. Events are of such magnitude that they seem beyond comprehension, as if some mysterious force is attempting to give us a view of life as neat as a shot of whiskey. In *Nicaragua* we see a widow wheeling her husband's corpse to his burial in their backyard, a young woman learning to fire a revolver, two young children dying after their rescue from a bombed building, and finally, a father recovering the body of a son who has been assassinated and apparently buried in lime. How much there is in these pictures, yet the richness of the captions, text, and chronology adds an extra measure that makes the pictures variously more savage and poignant. (Those who care to test my notion about human life in wartime and peacetime might care to consult Ms. Meiselas's earlier book of pictures and documents, *Carnival Strippers*, in which another aspect of human behavior—no longer out of the ordinary, it seems—is detailed in all its outrageous yet commonplace grotesqueness.)

*Visions of China*, printed in black and white and using camera photography in one of its gentler modes, attempts the impossible: to encompass a generation of change in a country whose size and complexity is beyond human comprehension. We get an impression of arbitrary rules, a sense of the regularization (we call it regimentation) of an unimaginable mass of human beings. The book leads my thoughts back to America and the suggestions that are now made in increasing number and with growing intensity about doing something of the same sort here in the name of what is good and true. It puts me in mind of that itinerant fourteenth-century Bulgarian preacher who encouraged men to sin that the grace of repentance might be given them. Must we, have we, come to logic such as this? [WV]

**TRADITION**  
by Edward Shils

(University of Chicago Press; 334 pp.; \$20.00)

Edith Kurzweil

Tradition, though necessary for survival, is dying; and even such books as *The Tradition of the New*, *The Tradition of Modernity*, and *The Symbolist Tradition* deal with only their specific subjects and forget about the idea of tradition itself. Or so argues Edward Shils. He believes that to avoid doom, modern societies must make conscious efforts to perpetuate traditions, and particularly the "tradition of traditionality." Substantive traditions have been explicitly and implicitly attacked by science and rationality and need defending against unfair associations with dogmatism, superstition, or religiosity—and most of all against Marxists of all stripes, against the counterculture, and against the various liberation movements. These themes were already evident in Professor Shils's many incisive essays on science, social science, and policy questions, and particularly in *The Intellectuals and the Powers* (1972), although now he perceives himself more directly indebted to the "spirits of Max Weber and T. S. Eliot."

Like Eliot and many other literary critics, Shils locates the beginning of a tension between the sciences and the humanities in the Enlightenment, in

the increasing belief in science at the expense of religion, and in all the related questions about truth, morality, authority, and natural law. And like Weber, Shils examines systematically the ensuing contradictions. Both men perceive the "victory" of rationality—of truth and facts—without accepting as necessary an attendant decline or subversion of moral values—in politics, language, or in applications of technology. *Tradition* is a plea for the retention of what was best in the past and a brief for certain old-fashioned values—honesty and morality on the one hand and intellectual rigor on the other. But Shils's zeal to preserve traditions leads him at times to a frozen politics that exaggerate, for instance, the impact of the 1968 movements and ignore their failure and the ensuing backlash. The otherwise impressive scholarly references rarely go beyond 1970; they are restricted to Anglo-Saxon and German sources and to a rather narrow, Parsonian interpretation of Weber.

Shils quotes and analyzes Weber's many juxtapositions—tradition vs. science, religion vs. disenchantment, old-fashioned vs. modern—in order to show that Weber, while focusing on the progress of science, did not mean to imply that the new is better than the old. (This interpretation is aimed at intellectuals who play down the differences between Marx and Weber.) Professor Shils does concede that each generation, though in the grip of its past, has the chance to begin anew; but he emphasizes that such beginnings are kept in check through family and religious and educational institutions, even when these are partially or entirely rejected. Marxists, from Lenin to Althusser, would agree with this of course, although they propose to effect the total break Shils fears. He, on the other hand, goes on to underline how the past is internalized, assimilated, and memorized by individuals; how it lives on through ethnic identity, the Old Testament, the Gospels, Greek and Roman historiographies, Islamic or Buddhist religion, and how through the reservation and veneration of art and literature, buildings and monuments, or the collecting of antiques and documents, attachment to tradition is manifested—even by the Soviets, who have broken with and condemned bourgeois culture only to enshrine its artifacts.

As Professor Shils develops his ideas, he denigrates his opponents'. Jürgen

Habermas's notion that in the modern world system "technology has got out of control" is countered by the argument that "the tradition of technological innovation has existed since antiquity" and that inventions never were kept within national boundaries. He finds antihistorical the *Annales* concept of *longue durée*, finds the Frankfurt School not only full of "leftist dogma," but its antitraditionality itself a tradition; and he attacks all the social sciences—except to some extent economics—for their lack of historicity. Most of all Shils dismisses the Marxists' ritualistic references to man-the-maker-of-his-own-history. Of course Marx went on to add that man does not create his history out of whole cloth. Shils, though, is looking to preservation rather than to historical change. His concern is on traces of the past in oral and written traditions, religions, philosophy, and in the creation of science; the very selection of problems depends upon a body of valid and accepted knowledge. Since each discipline has a history, its origins can never be erased. Some, like sociology or the natural sciences, assimilate only their recent past. Literature, on the other hand, deals simultaneously with its entire tradition from antiquity to the present, reinterpreting, disseminating, and evaluating. Still, authors are judged by their authenticity, their genius, their originality, says Shils, and the fact that they are linked to a tradition tends to be overlooked.

In matters of theory Shils adheres strictly to Max Weber—a Weber whose "legitimate political order is ultimately charismatic." But charisma is played down subtly, allowing for an emphasis on the oppositions between rationality and tradition. As this relationship is explored, tradition is examined from every angle, as it forms attachments, reinstates the past, rationalizes, corrects perceptions, and much more. The intent of science to change traditions is contrasted with the way traditions are basic to religion, literature, and art. Depending upon the political system they "inhabit," these may turn into normative traditions. Because tradition is protean, Shils has much leeway in proving how the flouting of traditions—Baudelaire's green hair or Oscar Wilde's lobster on a leash—is not the complete negation of bourgeois traditions. According to Shils, traditions change constantly, lose adherents, re-surge and are revived, but the intent of