

**Photography, Philosophy, Spirituality:  
The Equivalencies of Wynn Bullock and Minor White**

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It is an extraordinary paradox of modern expression that photography, seemingly the most earthly and realistic of arts, has been used by devoted cameraworkers as a way toward the discovery of the mysterious, the spiritual, and the Divine.

Jonathan Green, *Octave of Prayer*

## **Photography, Philosophy, Spirituality: The Equivalencies of Wynn Bullock and Minor White**

**H**ow often in the life of a creative artist does the struggle with life's mysteries, the questions of death, existence and spirit, become greater than the substance of his artistic creations? Conversely, how often do his creations of art transcend all that was conceived in his mind? Can words, images or thoughts reveal Truth? Are they springboards to greater understanding or catalysts for profound experience? It is questions like these that became the fountainhead of the images and philosophies of photographers Wynn Bullock and Minor White.

Both Bullock and White were born near the beginning of an impending automotive age; Wynn Bullock in 1902 and Minor White in 1908. Although they were both born in northern cities, Bullock in Chicago and White in Minneapolis, they were to become separated by vast mid-America, each to know little of the other's career; Wynn Bullock, son of America's first female judge, was to become a Carmel Valley eccentric photographer/philosopher generating a small esoteric following, while Minor White, an initiate of the 1950's "beat generation", was to become the East Coast guru of photography during the 1960's.

For Bullock and White, the photograph was more than a direct recording of their external visual worlds. For them, the photograph could transcend its fact status; it could be intentional and metaphorical. The concept of equivalency, illuminated by Alfred Stieglitz during the 1930's, became a touchstone for the work of Bullock and White a decade later. It was the equivalent, that notion of something being more than itself, that Stieglitz so appropriately assigned to his cloud photographs.

My cloud photographs. my Songs of the Sky, are equivalent of my life experience. All my photographs are equivalent of my basic philosophy of life. All art is but a picture of certain basic relationships; an equivalent of the artist's most profound experiences of life. <sup>2</sup>

Although “Alfred Stieglitz chose the path least likely to be understood; inner growth through camera work,”<sup>3</sup> his ideas became a profound revelation for both his contemporaries and future photographers. In 1946, the year of Stieglitz's death, Minor White wrote:

Stieglitz said something or other about photography that makes visible the invisible and something else about true things being able to talk to each other. His talk itself was a kind of equivalent; that is, his words were not related to the sense he was making. If anyone had talked like that to me before, I certainly had not heard him.<sup>4</sup>

Although Bullock never met Stieglitz as White did, he was aware of his influence: “I think maybe the greatest thing, as far as I am concerned, that Stieglitz ever did was to just bring to the surface the meaning of the word equivalent.”<sup>5</sup> Bullock asserted his independence by adding:

I don't share the same worship of Stieglitz that many people exhibit. I feel that many of his photographs are very beautiful—I like the horses steaming in the snow. But “The Steerage” is just another good picture, but not one of his greatest <sup>6</sup>

Although Bullock worked with Stieglitz's “law of equivalents,”<sup>7</sup> one will find few direct references to it in his writing; rather the concept is incorporated into one of Bullock's own “laws” such as “the symbol is not the thing symbolized.”<sup>8</sup> White, on the other hand, exercised the term more frequently, and in a more didactic sense in regards to “experiencing photographs”<sup>9</sup> a method he developed in the classroom and set to print in the influential *Aperture* quarterly which he edited. For White, the equivalent was best assimilated in a quiet meditative encounter, during which the photograph could be “read” as an intricate poem of light and shadow, its meaning transmitted in a flash of extraordinary cognition.

While Bullock's work was composed of single images, White combined single images to form sequences. Bullock's singular images approached equivalency on an intellectual-analytical-conceptual level. He said that "the medium of photography can record not only what the eyes see but what the mind's eye sees as well."<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, White's work emphasized an emotional level of communication inherent in his photographic sequences: "A picture story explains and demonstrates. A **sequence** sustains the feeling states."<sup>11</sup> Bullock photographed objects as symbols as an expression of his "principles,"<sup>12</sup> abstract statements of other-dimensional possibilities beyond mere surface appearances. His daughter and enthusiast, Barbara, described his "opposites are one" principle:

Not only is it possible through a pair of opposites to know or better know two comparable things (e.g., a decaying typewriter, a man-made object, lying on a rotting redwood log, a natural object); it is possible to learn about a third, more complex, encompassing thing (e.g., relatedness). Depending on how events are associated with each other and from what perspectives they are viewed, the third thing can become a partner in another set of opposites (e.g., relatedness/uniqueness), which in turn can merge to define an altogether different thing (e.g., identity, being, order). It is because of the union of the two in one that Bullock calls his principle "opposites are one."<sup>13</sup>

A virtuoso of the natural landscape, Bullock, using a cumbersome 8 by 10 inch view camera, examined the fauna and flora of his environment with the level-headed precision of an x-ray technician; his skeletal and visceral images being symbolic of his internalized, eclectic philosophy. Bullock developed his photographic philosophy through a symbiosis of nature and the intellect. Although he felt that nature itself was his principle teacher<sup>14</sup> much of his headwork was synthesized from his readings of Einstein, Korzybski, Russell and others.<sup>15</sup>

Korsybski, an eclectic non-Aristotelian philosopher and semanticist who Bullock personally studied with, was perhaps his greatest single ally.<sup>16</sup>

In Bullock's *Woman and Dog* (1953), we become detached, as if looking through the objectives of a biologist's microscope, examining a specimen of feminine naivete. In this photograph, the "woman and dog and forest... are all part of each other, at least for the moment, sharing each other's rhythms and orders."<sup>17</sup> Bullock elucidates: "I believe that man is not the center of all things. I believe he's part of nature, distinctive and special in his own ways—as are all forms of life."<sup>18</sup> In *Child among Thistles* (1956), Bullock establishes a cosmic relationship. "The child among thistles... is part of a larger context yet also unique within it."<sup>19</sup>

Minor White placed more emphasis on the sequence than on the single image. His sequences are synergistic; the potency of his work is increased through the association of his single images as a whole..

In *Mirrors, Messages, Manifestations*, he wrote:

It is curious that I always want to group things, a series of sonnets, a series of photographs; whatever rationalizations appear, they originate in urges that are rarely satisfied with single images. (San Francisco, July 1947).<sup>20</sup>

The concept of equivalency as an evocation of emotion was the intent of White's sequence, *Song Without Words*, a series that had evolved several times since its conception in 1948, finally ending in a set of 14 images in 1960 with varied subjects and individual titles such as: *Cloud over Pacific*, *Bob Bright*, *Surf*, *Vertical*, *Sun in Rock* and *Car & Bank*. Said White: "the portraits were intended to express my feelings as I stood on the shore, thinking about a friend still in the war somewhere on the other side of the Pacific."<sup>21</sup>

White spoke of the rock forms of his *Sequence 4* (1949) as possessing obvious sexual symbolism.<sup>22</sup> He elucidated upon the emotional theme of this sequence:

Being the victim of an emotional storm those afternoons, sex symbols were just what I needed. I had no need to study these familiar forms to photograph them; that had already been done, so I worked very fast. To fill out the implications of the sequence, however, it was necessary to incorporate images made before the crucial period and as long as ten years afterward.<sup>23</sup>

Many of White's other images also display a direct, objective symbolism involving a similarity of shapes; a boat becomes a fish, a rock becomes a face, frost becomes a wave. An additional gesture which White combined with his images was the addition of verse. In *Mirrors*, *Messages*, *Manifestations*, with one image he offered the following:

These unexpected gifts of magic still continue  
 Their source as mystifying as ever  
 Whether the "face" before me  
 Is human, cloud, ice, fire...<sup>24</sup>

White's later works, *Light*<sup>7</sup> (1968) and *Octave of Prayer* (1972), involve transcendental, religious and mystical symbolism.

A very important part of the definition of an equivalent still remains. Such a picture must evoke an emotion, and a very special emotion at that. It is a heightened emotion such as the East Indian would say "takes one heavenward" or Bernard Berenson would say is "life enhancing."<sup>25</sup>

White suggested that the artist photographer can only progress up to a point on a spiritual scale by practicing photography. He believed that experiencing photographs "at very best becomes a catalyst—no more."<sup>26</sup> He felt that to transcend photography one must go to higher levels of experience, namely prayer, meditation and contemplation, which would eventually lead into mystical union with God.

When I first read Evelyn Underhill's book *Mysticism* in 1955, I, like many other photographers and artists, could not believe that our beloved medium could only transcend matter and subject to the third level of prayer. She says in effect that the mystic can understand the artist, but the artist cannot comprehend the mystic or follow him very far on his journey. Such a thought was utterly contrary to my anticipation. Some years before this exhibition *Octave of Prayer* was conceived I had to admit that she was right because experiences arose that swept me far beyond the flash of union with things and places.<sup>27</sup>

White characterizes the state of union with an image “as being both wordless and imageless.”<sup>28</sup> “Any photograph or group in this exhibition might catalyze the functioning of equivalence in us as symbols for the mind, or metaphors for the heart, or implied intermovements for the body. They arouse a glimmer of the sacred—if spirit participates!”<sup>29</sup>

In *Light*<sup>7</sup> White contemplates the use of the Mandala as a symbol/catalyst.

The esoteric purpose of the Mandala is to lead into the center. The contemplation of it leads back to the central Self. Carl Jung says the Mandalas are archetypal images that connect us to the cosmic. Any photographer can print a negative four times in such a way as to lead the eye towards the center. As yet, probably no photographer has used the mandalic photograph as a means of circumambulation leading to the central Self. But that will change.<sup>30</sup>

The cover of White's later book, *Octave of Prayer*, suggests such a mandalic symbol.

As Minor White spoke of the power of prayer and contemplation to attain union with God, Wynn Bullock evolved his own system of “self-reflection”<sup>31</sup> and formed a series of short-phrased “principles” which became verbal mantras because he repeated them over and over again to himself and to others as well.<sup>32</sup> Bullock was searching for a greater understanding of “existence.”

Reality for me is the known, it is of sense-brain-mind. Existence is the unknown, for no one has created any existence. I experience reality, I believe in existence.<sup>33</sup>



Bullock spoke of the direct symbolic power of his photographs:

To me everything in art is a symbol, its never the thing. The photograph of the tree is not the tree, the painting of the person is not the person.”<sup>34</sup>

Although Bullock felt philosophically akin to Minor White, he maintained a skeptical distance to the idea of mysticism while contrasting their symbolic attitudes:<sup>35</sup>

To me a symbol does not define things, things define symbols. The photograph does not define the tree, the tree defines the photograph. Now you can alter it when you print it, you can do all the things you want, but nothing will match the mystery of the tree. Now he has put on a show called ‘Light 7’. I don’t think anything can be beyond what it is. In other words, a tree can’t be more than a tree; light can’t be more than light. Light five was light; six and seven went beyond light. That to me is pure mysticism.<sup>36</sup>

“Space/time,” a principle that Bullock spent much time with, was the one concept that pervades most of his photographs. He

. . . speaks of space and time as one, i.e., space/time. As he explains it, without space there would be no substance or form to make functioning possible. Without time there would be no functioning to give meaning and life to form. Together, space/time define form and functioning; together they define aspects of existence and perception.<sup>37</sup>

Bullock’s space/time photographs are internally, viscerally evocative of the birth/death cycle of life. The viewer of such kinetic “events” must consider them intellectually with his mind, not with his senses. For example, in *Horsetails and Logs* (1957), “an image which evokes the continuum of life flowing through the individual, interrelated events and evolving through such manifestations as growth and decay, gravity and order,”<sup>38</sup> Bullock speaks of the quantum mechanical vitality of the living and decaying objects:

It’s alive from the standpoint that everything is atomic, regardless of what it is. It’s alive in a way that it is going back to the earth,, and it’s also nourishing the things that are going back out of the earth.<sup>39</sup>

The five senses on a physical level can only react by outside stimulation in the ever-recurring now. They cannot bring back the past or respond to the future reality of anything because three-dimensionality is the function of the senses. So reality to

the physical senses always remains only a tiny fraction of the reality of the tree.<sup>40</sup>

Bullock attempted to create; his single images in such a way as to evoke in the viewer a space/time event as if it were a “movie” inside the mind; the mind converting the static image into a complex drama of events, our sensory perceptions into intellectual comprehension.

This level of reality is a static experience which only the mind can make dynamic by blending past, present and future into a greater measure of reality. The present is only an intersection in the time of every event of the universe. It is like the single frame of a motion picture film. When the single frame is seen the motion stops. It is a function of the creative mind to overcome the inertia of the (now) perceived reality.<sup>41</sup>

In contrast to Bullock’s use of **natural** elements to evoke the cyclical nature of time, Minor White in one of his single images, *The Three Thirds*, utilizing “hermetic”<sup>42</sup> symbols, in **abstract** form to convey the life/death cycle and suggesting by its title a sequence-like composition, can perhaps be thought of as three frames of a motion picture film.

The photograph *The Three Thirds* needs such a title because the picture as information is next to useless; it is meaningful only if the subject is treated as a kind of peg upon which to hang something, in this case self-contained symbols. From left to right, clouds in window = youth, plaster under clap-boards = middle years, broken glass = old age.<sup>43</sup>

White utilizes space and time from a different perspective in his sequences. He creates a “space/time” event not so much by involving the viewers intellect, as Bullock seems to, but by involving the viewer physically and sensually in the **act** of viewing. White tried to create a relationship between the sensory apprehension of the work (the movement of one’s eyes from one image to the next) to the final experience he wished to communicate, which is emotional (a movement of the feelings). Minor White relates the movie analogy to his sequences:

A sequence of photographs is like a cinema of stills. The time and space between photographs is filled by the beholder, first of all from

himself, then from what he can read in the implications of design, the suggestions springing from treatment, and any symbolism that might grow from within the subject itself.<sup>44</sup>

While White often photographed objects to symbolize metaphorically something beyond themselves, Bullock photographed the object for what it was; an attempt to explain its own nature. When Bullock deviated from his “straight” images he utilized some special techniques. Some of his images which included subjects in motion (surf, fog) were photographed with long exposures to suggest the movement of the event in time, creating a visual tension between the things that moved and the things that remained static (rocks, wreckage). Bullock’s negative prints, which caused objects to glow as if lit from within, were made to suggest the presence of a living energy in those objects (rocks, dead trees) that we would normally consider lifeless and inanimate.

What was the significance of photography for Wynn Bullock and Minor White? Both Bullock and White surpassed the traditional, representational modes of photography. Perhaps the medium itself implies such a transcendence. Photography for both Bullock and White had to go beyond itself to point towards the meaning of the unknown that they both searched for. White felt that photography could only bring an individual to a specific level of human and spiritual development, “that image at very best becomes a catalyst—no more” and that it is “to be left behind without regrets” to go on to a “life of prayer”<sup>45</sup> which was a form of introspective meditation. For White, the photographic examination of his external world became the “mirror” for examining himself. Bullock did not have the same ends in sight. He searched for greater and profounder symbols, what he called “universals” symbols that would stand the test of time. Bullock believed that:

“... symbols were more important than people. They have more power to influence the world than the people who create the symbols. Why is it that all the great philosophers, scientists, painters, and so forth, still have this great influence. It’s because of the symbols they’ve left us.”<sup>46</sup>

For Bullock, “great symbols, whether they be photographic, verbal or mathematical, can influence the lives and beliefs of people for thousands of years.”<sup>47</sup>

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Jonathan Green, Ohio State University lecture, 23 Feb. 1978.

<sup>2</sup>Quoted by Dorothy Norman, "Alfred Stieglitz," *Aperture* 8 (January 1960):37.

<sup>3</sup>Minor White, "The Light Sensitive Mirage," *Aperture* 6 (April 1958):76.

<sup>4</sup>Minor White, *Mirrors , Messages , Manifestations* (New York: Aperture, 1968), p. 46.

<sup>5</sup>Quoted by Tom Cooper and Paul Hill, "Wynn Bullock: An Interview, 2nd part," *Camera* (March 1976) , p. 41

<sup>6</sup>Ibid, p. 42 <sup>7</sup>Norman, p. 48.

<sup>8</sup>Barbara Bullock-Wilson, "Stage Two: 1948 - 1957," *Wynn Bullock—Photography: A Way Of Life*, ed. , Liliane De Cock (New York: Morgan and Morgan, Inc. , 1973 pp. 22-24.

<sup>9</sup>Walter Chappell and Minor White, eds. , "Some Methods for Experiencing Photographs," *Aperture* 5 (October 1957): 156.

<sup>10</sup>Wynn Bullock, *Wynn Bullock* (San Francisco: Scrimshaw Press, 1971), n. p. <sup>11</sup>White, *Mirrors , Messages , Manifestations* , p. 65.

<sup>12</sup>Some of Bullock's principles are: "the symbol is not the thing symbolized, "opposites are one," "space/time," "ordering and things ordered," and "reality and existence. "

<sup>13</sup>Barbara Bullock-Wilson, *Wynn Bullock*, p. 20.

<sup>14</sup>Cooper and Hill, *Camera* (March 1976) , p. 40.

<sup>15</sup>Edna Bullock, letter to Clyde Dilley, 1 November 1977.

<sup>16</sup>Peter Thompson, interview, Chicago, Illinois, November 1977. <sup>17</sup>Barbara Bullock-Wilson, *Wynn Bullock*, p. 22.

<sup>18</sup>Quoted by Cooper and Hill, *Camera* (March 1976), p. 40. <sup>19</sup>Barbara Bullock-Wilson, *Wynn Bullock*, p. 22.

<sup>20</sup>White, *Mirrors , Messages , Manifestations*, p. 65.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid, p. 227.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid, p. 163.

<sup>25</sup>Chappell and White, "Some Methods; " p. 131.

Footnotes (cont.)

<sup>26</sup>Minor White, ed., *Octave of Prayer* (New York: Aperture 1972), pp. 21-22.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid. p. 24. The exhibition, *Octave of Prayer*, was held in November, 1972. In 1968, Minor White was affected by an illness diagnosed as angina.

“This illness has a profound effect on the nature of his life: Distinct psychological changes occur which are more significantly related to the total personal and public environment than any in the past.” from Peter C. Bunnell, *Mirrors, Messages, Manifestations*, pp. 236-237.

<sup>28</sup>White, *Octave of Prayer*, p. 25.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

<sup>30</sup>Minor White, ed. , *Light*<sup>7</sup> , (New York: Aperture 1968), p. 13.

<sup>31</sup>Barbara Bullock -Wikson, *Wynn Bullock* , p. 25.

<sup>32</sup>Peter Thompson, interview, Chicago, Illinois, November 1977.

<sup>33</sup>Wynn Bullock, *Wynn Bullock* , n. p.

<sup>34</sup>Quoted by Cooper and Hill, *Camera* (March T976), p. 40.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid. <sup>36</sup>thid. <sup>37</sup>Barbara Bullock-Wilson, *Wynn Bullock*, p. 20.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>39</sup>Quoted by David Fuess in *Wynn Bullock*, (New York: Aperture 1976), p. 8.

<sup>40</sup>Wynn Bullock, “Space and Time,” *Photographers on Photographs* ed. by Nathan Lyons, (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc. , 1966), p. 37.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid.

<sup>42</sup>Jonathan Green, interview, Westerville, Ohio, 28 October 1977.

<sup>43</sup>White, “The Light Sensitive Mirage,” p. 81.

<sup>44</sup>White, *Mirrors, Messages, Manifestations*, p. 63.

<sup>45</sup>White, *Octave of Prayer*; p. 22.

<sup>46</sup>Quoted by Cooper and Hill, *Camera* (March 1976), p. 40.

<sup>47</sup>Wynn Bullock, *Wynn Bullock: The Photograph as Symbol*, (Mountain View , California: Artichoke Editions , 1976) , n. p.