

SATURDAY REVIEW: THE ARTS

The Emptiness of Our Empty Rooms

by Owen Edwards

THE HOLY GRAIL for certain questing parapsychologists is the clear and irrefutable photographs of a ghost, a passport picture of sorts providing bona fides at the border zone between this world and the next. So far, the results have been less than satisfying, looking more like cigarette smoke than the spectral remains of, say, farmer Ezekiel Peabody, of Salt Point, New York. For those of us less concerned with proof positive of hauntings, however, a highly successful form of "ghost picture" has long existed in the resonant empty rooms and spaces of such photographers as Frederick Evans, Eugène Atget, Walker Evans, and Clarence Laughlin. The pictures by these and other photographers are palpably filled with the spirits of those who have been there before.

No one with even an atrophied antenna for unsettling shadings is likely to enter an empty room without some infinitesimal wariness, some remainder of the child's animistic sensitivity to the aliveness of inanimate things. More so even than the clothes we wear, the rooms we wrap around ourselves are extensions and expressions of who we are (even if we are only apers of decorators), and the evocative possibilities in these rooms have encouraged some photographers to create a significant photographic subgenre of portraits without people.

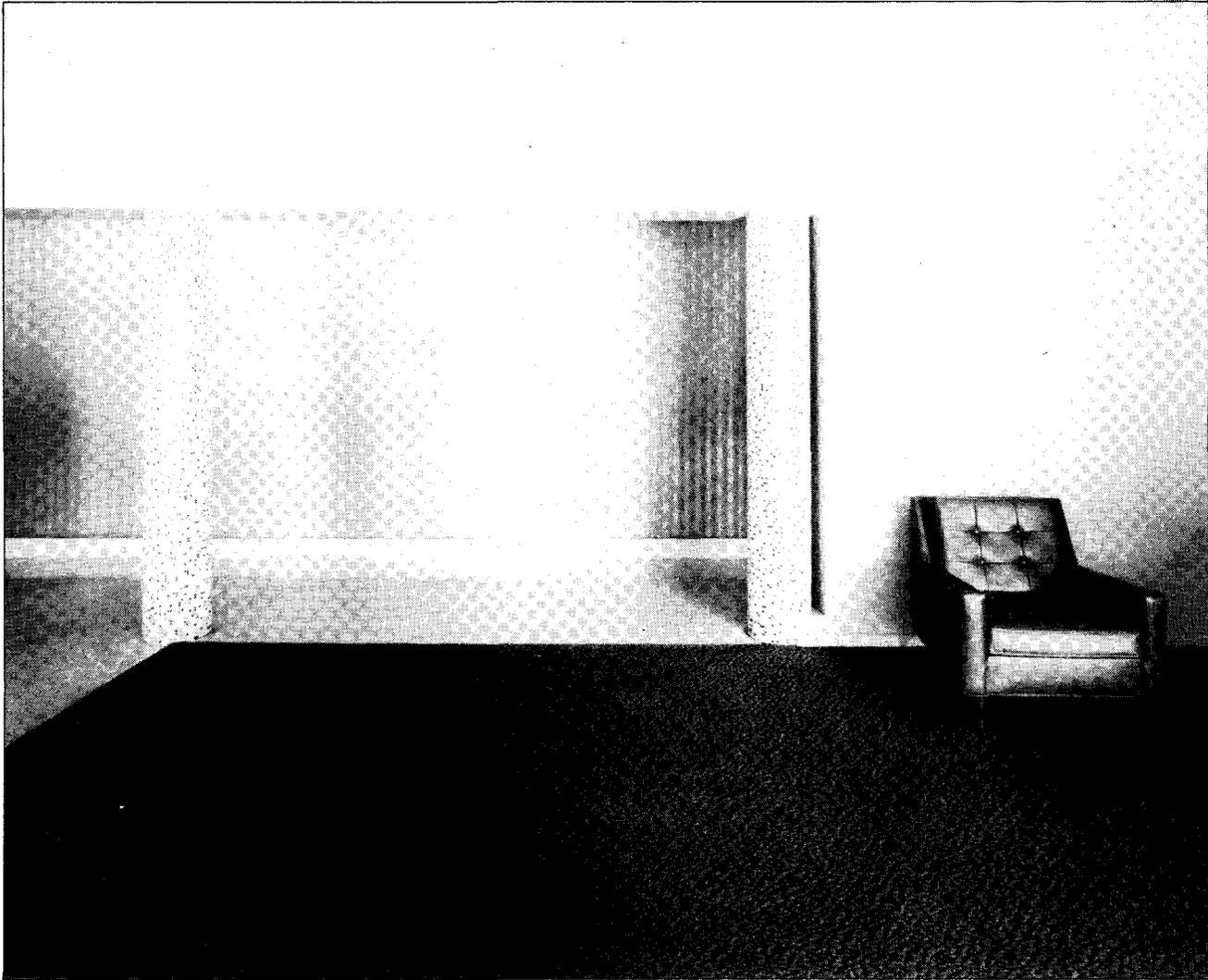
Atget's early morning-lighted Versailles gardens seem to hum with the small talk of yesterday evening's visitors; his still cafés at dawn seem to

smell of absinthe drunk the night before. Having set out dutifully to record a vanishing age in Paris, Atget ended up giving us documents with a soul. On the other end of the scale, Walker Evans fashioned a kind of reportage out of artistry and sentiment, inclining toward pre-industrial rooms of poor (hence honest) dirt farmers and studying the still lifes on bureau tops for clues to personalities for whom he may have felt (or wished to feel) something beyond an aesthetic concern. Laughlin, in his pictures of moldering town houses and plantations in Louisiana, determinedly seeks out settings as haunted by vanquished glories as Mycenae or Carthage. Like nudes and still lifes, the form persists in modes that reflect contemporary times.

In an exhibition called *Futuristic Scientific Place and Other Spaces*, seen recently at Manhattan's International Center of Photography, Lynne Cohen, a teacher of photography at the University of Ottawa, continues the venerable search for the presences in empty rooms. Her method is precise, though her documents are subtly biased. What results is both alluring and offputting. Cohen has conducted a curious search for the skin of our life and times in banquet halls, swimming pools, beauty parlors, Shriners' halls, nursing homes, apartment lobbies, waiting rooms, skating rinks, exhibition halls, model homes, and other places where humans come and go and leave their imprints. Or rather, leave almost no imprint at all, for Cohen's lugubrious conclusion seems to be that we've come

to such a pass in our cool, efficient, homogenized age that the spaces we inhabit have little more than a coincidental connection with whom we imagine ourselves to be.

As I have said, Cohen's is a biased viewpoint, and she uses her equipment and contrivances of timing to reinforce it. Her immaculate contact prints bring the smallest details under sharp scrutiny, while at the same time her view cameras flatten space, bringing everything backward or forward toward a single plane that seems just beyond reach. The effect is calculated to eliminate the sense of three dimensions, an element that matters enormously in the relationship of humans to any room; and this flattening also gives each object in Cohen's rooms a roughly equivalent importance. With no people to lend these rooms the conventional balance (by sitting in chairs, for instance, and ignoring wall plugs), the effect is to dehumanize the scenery beyond its own cool artificiality. A government employment office, perfunctorily furnished with a desk, two chairs, and one of those monstrous potted plants that might as well be artificial, comes across with such intimidating bloodlessness that it seems impossible any empathy could ever invade the place. A department store after closing, at Christmastime—a few bits of tinsel, the requisite red-and-white stockings tacked to the wall, a TV lounge chair covered with a rumpled blanket where yet another bogus Santa spent his delusory day—silently mocks the thinness of our commercial rituals.



Apartment lobby, Hamilton, Ontario, 1977—"A bloodlessness that no empathy could ever invade."

Perhaps the most disturbing interiors are those where people meet to celebrate... what? The momentary surcease of monotony, perhaps, or the faint echoes of roots with "Italian Nights" and Oktoberfests. These dismal collages of balloons, crepe paper, slapped-together bandstands, and hokey props (a giant papier-mâché Tyrolean hat for the Alpine Society's yearly bash, an eagle crest for the German Club) are all the more hollow in their emptiness because of the forced gaiety of their pending (or just past) gatherings. Cohen makes us confront these void arenas as if we were the first partygoers to arrive on the scene and fills us with the dour realization that no amount of band music, no gusts of joke-provoked laughter, will ever fill these vast, cheerless halls.

Inevitably, there are a few private living rooms in the survey, and though these pictures are no less carefully

crafted than the rest of Cohen's work, they are too obvious and easy (and perhaps too smugly conspiratorial). However appalling and tacky we may find a small, neat room with its bullfight posters, plaster praying hands, fake fireplace, Fiberglas drapes, and sad little flowered chair, this room is no more than the manifestation of a need to have a space labeled "me." We laugh, or condescend, at some risk, since the need is common to us all; and a reproduction of Rodin's "The Thinker" is no more a cliché than a Mies van der Rohe chair—just cheaper. The public places, because they are meant to appeal to large numbers of diverse people, are evidence of modern, technocratic society's negation of the senses.

Frankly, it would be easy for me to dislike Lynne Cohen's photographs. Like pictures of protestors putting daisies in the gun barrels of soldiers or

of beer-bloated spectators at stock car races, their statement is pat and obvious. Seen unsympathetically, they have an uninviting archness about them. But no one who has ever found himself in the unnerving swamp of a motel dining room, where nothing, from the "nondairy creamer" to the styrofoam ceiling beams to the fabric in the waitress's uniform, was what it pretended to be, can ignore Cohen's disenchanting vision.

Times are crass. The public places we are bound to experience yet helpless to humanize offer ever colder comfort, and at their worst—as with Cohen's bleak interiors—they rime the soul.

Amid all the Weldwood, polyester, Fiberglas, linoleum, Naugahyde, Formica, and plastics of a hundred kinds, Cohen whispers, there can be no ghosts, only the longing of the living for ages and spaces past. ●

THE MOVIES

The Great Charlie Chaplin

by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.

FACED WITH the late spring's dreary trickle of new films, New Yorkers may perhaps be pardoned for having taken a fresh look at some old ones. Among the revivals, Chaplin's *A Woman of Paris* and the Lubitsch series at the Metropolitan Museum must take first place. I trust that they will be sent on national tour.

A Woman of Paris has been unavailable in recent years. Its release now, in an excellent new print with a score composed by Chaplin himself, has caused great excitement among local cineasts. I do not suppose that it survives in quite the same sense that contemporaneous works survive—Cummings's *Enormous Room*, for example, or Willa Cather's *A Lost Lady*. Compared to the novels, it is unmistakably a period piece. The conventions of 1923—the lachrymose beginning, the sententious subtitles, the simple-minded melodramatics of the plot—are more obtrusive in film than in fiction, and the innovations, more covert. Yet as one moves beyond the contrivances, one is suddenly aware of a comic vision of enormous style and originality.

This vision is so startlingly different from what audiences expect of Chaplin that the film disappointed on its initial release and has never quite won its proper place in the Chaplin canon in the years since. Instead of the little tramp, low life, slapstick, and the usual Chaplin effects, *A Woman of Paris* is an essay in high comedy, worldly and sophisticated, with strong undercurrents of satire and melancholy.

The film comes into its own after about 18 minutes, when Adolphe Menjou saunters into a Paris restaurant. With his insouciant manner, sardonic smile, arched eyebrows, waxen moustache, with his air of cynical imperturbability—whether smoking cigarettes, eating bonbons, or playing a saxophone—with the mockery that extends, one feels, to himself as well as to the world, Menjou beautifully embodies the Chaplin vision of blithe but jaded decadence. In a later time, Menjou's deplorable politics kept high-minded critics, I fear, from awarding him his full due as an actor. Nevertheless he has given a series of superb performances through the years, as in *The Front Page*, *The Milky Way*, *Paths of Glory*. But nothing he did excelled his performance under Chap-

lin's direction in *A Woman of Paris*.

Edna Purviance, who plays the heroine, is matronly by contemporary standards and at times bears a disconcerting resemblance to Margaret Dumont. She is nonetheless effective in a stately way as the woman of Paris, torn between an impecunious artist and the wealthy roué—a choice, the subtitle informs us, of "marriage or luxury." She is shocked to read about Menjou's engagement to an heiress. "It makes no difference to us," Menjou cheerfully observes. "We can go on just the same." With quick strokes and a kind of classical simplicity, Chaplin shows the bird fluttering in the gilded cage, throwing her necklace out the window in a gesture of defiance, then rushing downstairs to snatch it back from the tramp who has picked it up on the street. Menjou meanwhile blows away on his saxophone.

"You never take me seriously," she complains. Nor does he. He takes nothing seriously. After the artist's suicide, she returns to a simple country life. In the last scene, she rides with an orphan child on the back of a horse-drawn wagon as Menjou speeds by in a high-powered automobile. They do not see each other. They had never seen each other.

A Woman of Paris, with its grace, fluidity, and power of suggestion, opened up a world of high comedy to the movies. One can see why Lubitsch so much adored it and why he developed its mood in his own brilliant comedies of the later Twenties and the Thirties. So it was appropriate that the revival of *A Woman of Paris* was accompanied by a Lubitsch season at the Metropolitan Museum. Though *Ninotchka* was inexplicably omitted, most of the others were there—*Trouble in Paradise*, with its subtle and ironic symmetries of plot and characterization; *The Shop Around the Corner*, with its sparkling blend of Viennese gaiety and sentiment; *To Be or Not to Be*, the best of black comedies, in which the anti-Nazi satire seemed to some in the dark days of 1942 frivolous but which in retrospect is a dazzling triumph.

One wonders what happened to the tradition of *A Woman of Paris* after Lubitsch. Where is the high comedy of our own time? We have no contemporary Lubitsch, nor do we have players in the witty style of Menjou,

Carole Lombard, William Powell, Miriam Hopkins, Kay Francis, Herbert Marshall, Melvin Douglas, Cary Grant, Robert Montgomery, Roland Young, Charles Butterworth, Edward Everett Horton, and those other high-polish comedians of the 1930s.

No doubt if the demand existed, the directors and players would appear. Perhaps television has slowed up the perceptions of the mass audience. Andrew Sarris remarked the other day that his students are baffled by the work of Preston Sturges. The Sturges films simply have too many jokes, nuances, implications, innuendos, for a generation used to television sitcom and one point at a time. The comic modes of yesteryear require them to absorb too much too quickly.

One wonders too whether the new freedom of the movies has not had as an unforeseen consequence a catastrophic decline in irony, subtlety, and suggestion. Chaplin and Lubitsch had to work within the challenge of limitations. The limitations were often asinine, but they tested the ingenuity of directors, writers, and actors. Vernacular films were more carefully written, their dialogue considerably more vivid and arresting, in those days before Anglo-Saxon monosyllables became de rigueur. Similarly, the shot of Herbert Marshall thoughtfully eyeing Kay Francis's bed in *Trouble in Paradise* is a good deal sexier than the two lying on the bed locked in steamy embrace would have been. Uninhibited profanity, sex, and violence give filmmakers too easy an out.

I am not arguing, God knows, for a return to the Legion of Decency. But a little self-restraint might stimulate creativity. As Goethe said, the master proves himself within his limitations. ●

Answer to Middleton Double-Crostic No. 150

Robert Frost:
Questioning Faces

The winter owl banked just in time to pass
And save herself from breaking window glass.
And her wings straining suddenly spread
Caught color from the last of evening red
In a display of underdown and quill
To glassed-in children at the window sill.