

The world within and the world without
Forms and functions of utopia in photography

Anne-Claire Bondon

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Abstract: In *The Photograph*, Graham Clarke writes: “In the end there *is* no literal reality. All is construction and myth and, ultimately, self-enclosed reality¹.” This article envisages this ‘self-enclosed reality’ as a space of possible utopias and the photograph as a consequent imagination-opener. Based on fifties and sixties American photography, this article attempts to survey the possible forms and functions of utopia in photography as well as to investigate how dystopian and utopian visions generated by photographs can, if not change, at least challenge our conception of man and society.

Introduction: The photographer as a “utopian animal”

Utopia is a concept which has been dismissed as naïve and dangerous by most political thinkers since the mid 19th century, but became more generally feared after the demise of Nazism and the totalitarian drift of communism. Try call for a revolution nowadays, a complete change of political or social order and you will most likely be called “utopian”- and it will certainly not be meant as a compliment.

However, as most scholars have repeatedly pointed out, utopia is an intrinsic human feature. Man is a creature who perpetually seeks to improve his condition, who walks towards progress as towards a light at the end of a tunnel. Paul Ricoeur

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¹ Graham Clark, *The Photograph*, (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1997), 119

explains that a society deprived of utopia would be a society without purpose² while Miguel Abensour states that man is a “*utopian animal*”³.

If utopia really “pervades every aspect of human life⁴”, what better medium than photography to capture it? Indeed, the photographer entertains a double relationship with utopia: as a *utopian animal* himself he can use his photographs to spread a utopian message, which translates his social ideal, but he can also be the witness of the utopian aspirations of his time. Depending on his intention and on the subject matter reality offers him to compose with, utopia takes on different forms and functions.

With particular interest for American photography of the fifties and sixties, this essay will propose a non-exhaustive survey of the occurrences of utopia in photography, as well as a glimpse into utopia’s role in photography’s “intelligent interpretation of the world⁵”.

Utopia-Generators : “a vision to be pursued”

Sometimes Utopia embodies more than an image of what the good life would be and becomes a claim about what it could and should be: the wish that things might be otherwise becomes a conviction that it does not have to be like this. Utopia is then not just a dream to be enjoyed but a vision to be pursued⁶.

-Ruth Levitas

² « Nous ne pouvons imaginer une société sans utopie, car ce serait une société sans dessin » author’s translation “we cannot imagine a society without utopia for it would be a purposeless society.” in Paul Ricoeur, “*L’Idéologie et l’Utopie*”, (Paris : Editions du Seuil, 1997), 372

³ Miguel Abensour, *L’Homme est un Animal utopique*, (Paris : Les Editions de la Nuit, 2013)

⁴ Author’s translation to « L’élément utopique imprègne tous les aspects de l’existence. » in Ricoeur, *L’idéologie et l’Utopie*, 361

⁵ Lewis W. Hine, “*Social Photography; How the Camera May Help in the Social Uplift*,” Proceedings of the National Conference of Charities and Correction at the Thirty-sixth Annual Session held in the City of Buffalo, New York, June 9-16, 1909, Alexander Johnson ed. (Fort Wayne, IN: Press of Fort Wayne, 1909), 355-359.

⁶ Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, (Witney : Peter Lang Ltd, 2011), 1

A utopia-generator can be seen as a photograph which explicitly incites the viewer to picture a perfect world within and without the photo itself. Take, for example, W. Eugene Smith's photograph *Walk to Paradise Garden* taken in 1946. *Walk to Paradise Garden* epitomizes post-war hopes of new beginnings as W. Eugene Smith commented:

It was a spring day...We walked along my children-and I. We were in different worlds, for the children were exultant in exploring their new world, and I was desperately trying to regain my powers from a past world. (...) Mist hazed my eyes, I began to tremble, nearly sick; turned away so that my children who had continued on might not turned and discover I was crying-crying out from the agony of my relief⁷.

The photo symbolizes faith in the future, and invites the viewer to enter the photographer's hopeful world. The photograph leaves numerous open doors for the viewer who is free to imagine where these children are going: seemingly towards a peaceful and bountiful world, towards the perfect world that each and every one of us has pictured in his mind at least a hundred times in his life. The photograph results from the photographer's intentional composition with real elements, which become partly fictional. The children, though real, become characters of our own imagination, they become our kids, our nephews, our nieces, for whom we dream of happy days to come. Turning their back on the viewer also symbolizes a rupture with and a departure from the old ways of the world, a salutary renouncement to our darkest past and an adventurous leap towards the horizon. A new world was to be built, but what world would that be?

Like Smith's children, many would look for the way to *Paradise Garden* demanding that America, as the leader of the "free world" live up to its ideals of equality and freedom. In the late forties and early fifties, photographers like Gordon Parks started to hint at what would be one of the greatest struggles of the decade: the civil rights movement. In *US government Charwoman*, Parks photographed a black cleaning lady, standing in front of a blurred American flag in the background. The woman is represented holding a broomstick and a mop - two items generally associated with charwomen. However the way Ella Watson stands in front of the American flag, in the presidential city of Washington, points to a different kind of

⁷ Lili Bezner-Corbus, *Photography and Politics in America : from the New Deal into the Cold War*, (Baltimore : The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999) ,161

interpretation where she would no longer be a charwoman but a chairwoman. The visual as well as the spelling ambiguities present in the photograph take the viewer to the very frontier between “what is” and “what could be”. In 1940s American society, this woman would have had to overcome three main obstacles in the way of her potential chairwomanship: being black, being a woman and originating from the working class. Nonetheless, the photograph forces the viewer to imagine a time (obviously in the future) when the United States would have a black female president, and to subsequently reflect upon the changes needed to guarantee equal opportunity in the US which could ultimately lead to the realization of Parks’s utopian vision. Ten years later in Parks’s 1952 *Emerging Man*, we see a black man seemingly “emerging” from the sewers to the street. What certainly strikes the viewer, the “punctum” of this picture to use Roland Barthes’ words -the arrow picking the viewer’s attention- is the wide-opened eyes of the man and the contrasting colors behind him. Light seems to be slowly overtaking the darkness that surrounds him, announcing the potential re-birth of the black man within the post-war American society- as would better be expressed by Nina Simone a decade later: “*It’s a new dawn, it’s a new day, it’s a new life for me*”. As in *US Government Charwoman*, the title given to the picture is just as important as the picture itself, for it orients the viewer’s imagination in a specific direction. In both photos, the utopian dimension serves Parks’s tacit social ideals and questions the very idea of equal opportunity in the American society of the post war era.

Both of Parks’s photographs are utopia generating photos, since the viewer - though aware of the impossible immediate realization of the picture’s underlying dream- is tempted to think somewhere at the back of his mind: “What if?” Parks’s photographs foreshadow Martin Luther King’s 1963 “*I have a dream*” speech and remind us that utopia, as expressed by Ricoeur, is indeed the conjunction of a transcendental ideal (equality in that case) and the rebellion of an oppressed class⁸. Fighting for a world in which a black woman could become president of the United States, in which a black man would not be considered as a second-rate citizen, but

⁸ Reference to « L'utopie moderne, se définit par cette conjonction entre un idéal transcendant et la rébellion d'une classe opprimée », author’s translation “Modern utopia can be defined as the conjunction of a transcendental ideal and the rebellion of an oppressed class” in Paul Ricoeur, *L'idéologie et l'Utopie*, 36

rather would “emerge” as white man’s equal, becomes- in Ruth Levitas’ words- “*a vision to be pursued.*”

“It does not have to be like this”

‘In dreams begin responsibilities’, wrote the poet Delmore Schwartz. To most Americans this has meant a responsibility to transform the Dream into realities. To others it has meant a responsibility to expose ways in which the Dream has failed⁹.

Utopia generating pictures can be divided in three sub-groups. The first one can be found in photographs displaying utopia in disguise of dystopia.

One of the first photographers to use this trick successfully was Lewis Hine¹⁰. Hine’s reformist prospects lead him to investigate child labor to better expose its fault. Though Hine’s photographs look highly dystopian at first glance, the photographer’s intention is in itself utopian. Some of Hine’s most famous photographs like *Sadie, a cotton mill spinner, Lancaster, South Carolina, 1908*, or *Breaker boys at a Pennsylvania coal mine*, “revealed a shocking reality that most Americans had never seen before¹¹.” The sooty-faced boys and the little girls working bare foot in immense factories were America’s children sacrificing their childhood innocence on merciless machines- a reality most were not fully aware of. Hine, and the National Child Labor Committee (NCLC) with whom he collaborated, aimed to stir indignation and uneasiness in the viewer. Indignation often being the first step towards petitioning and protesting, the photograph therefore acted as a subtle path towards social awareness and political action. In *American Photography and the American dream*, Jacob Guidmond writes that Hine’s “photographs are analogous to doorways-and give us the opportunity to be transformed upward, from indifferent or

⁹David Madden, *American Dreams, American nightmares*, (Carbondale : Southern Illinois University Press, 1970), xviii

¹⁰ For more detail on utopia in Hine’s photography, see Anne Lesme, *La Coïncidence d’un Idéal Artistique et d’une Pensée Sociale Utopique chez Lewis W.Hine*, in *Art et Utopie, Pensées Anglo-Américaine Volume V*, Mathilde Arrivé ed. (Paris : Michel Houdiard Editeur, 2012)

¹¹ Russel Freedman and Lewis Hine, *Kids at Work, Lewis Hine and the Crusade against Child Labour*, (New York : Clarion Books 1994), 5

apathetic consumers who do not know or care about workers to concerned citizens who would support the reforms needed to make the children's lives better¹².” For Hine, the photograph indeed worked as much as a staunch criticism of the industrial exploitation of children, as a reformist proposal intended to arouse awareness in the viewer and to subsequently lead to the progressive eradication of child labor. Jacob Riis, used the same technique when he photographed slums and homeless families in the 1890s. “Riis in particular, frequently selected scenes filled with dirt, squalor, and litter, to show the need for cleaning up slums”¹³ as can be seen in a photograph such as *Bottle Alley, Mulberry Bend*¹⁴ for instance.

Robert Frank's 1955 *American Trolley* is reminiscent of Hine's photographs displaying utopia in disguise of dystopia. In *American Trolley, New Orleans, 1955*, the bus functions as a symbolical prison, in which the different protagonists are locked in separate blocks. Only the black man and the white kid seem to be trying to escape- their hand reaching outside- both of them staring at Frank with intense, somewhat painful, sullen eyes, while a white woman sitting at the front rather puts up a disdainful, almost threatening look. Sitting behind the steering wheel is a white man blurred by the reflection of the windowpane as if his presence was so obvious that it did not need to be visually asserted. In one picture, Frank manages to encapsulate the complex reality of American life, the patriarchal, hierarchical American world with the white man at the top and the black woman at its bottom. Frank offers a forceful vision of a compartmented, divided, segregated society where there are first rate and second rate citizens as in Orwell dystopian novels.

At that particular moment in American history, the use of utopia in disguise of dystopia in documentary photography provided a powerful criticism of the American Dream, as opposed to the photojournalists of the popular press of Life and Look magazines who were paid to reinforce and maintain the collective belief and faith in the American way of life¹⁵ and of the United States as a “utopia realized”¹⁶.”

¹² James Guidmond, *American Photography and the American Dream*, (Chapel Hill & London : The University of Carolina Press, 1991), 84

¹³ Ibid, 218

¹⁴ Jacob Riis, *How the other Half lives* ,(New York : Dover Publication Inc, 1971),12

¹⁵ “Photojournalism became, to use phrases from the 1950s, a “mirror”, and a “showcase” for middle class Americans because it enabled them to see their virtues reflected in magazines like Life and Look and also exhibit the same virtues to others abroad” In James Guidmond, *American Photography and the American Dream*, 153

Photographers like Erwit, Klein or Frank instead called into the very symbols of the American dream. In Elliott Erwit's photograph *Las Vegas Nevada, 1954* for instance, the casino, emblem of the West where fortune can be met within a few seconds, becomes a symbolical grave where an old man with a distraught look seems to have spent and abandoned his life at the roulette table. His gaze but also his emaciated face suggest that not only the casino, but what the casino stands for – an insatiable thirst for money- have literally consumed the life out of the man.

In Klein's *Eighth Avenue Luncheonette, New York City, 1955* the omnipresent, invasive ads can be linked to Robert Frank's use of the American flag, often occupying most of the frame as in *Parade, Hoboken, New Jersey*. In both pictures, people's faces disappear behind ads and flags which seem to devour or absorb them. The flags and ads work as powerful symbols of the alienating consumerism and the frenetic patriotism which pervaded American life in the fifties. The dystopian surface of Frank and Klein's photographs were too subversive to be welcomed by the American society of the time. Most people preferred to close their eyes on reality's imperfection to live in the everlasting dream that both Hollywood and the popular press had so skillfully crafted. As an editor who originally rejected Robert Frank's *The Americans* for publication pointed out: "If this is America...then we should burn it down completely and start all over again¹⁷." America, home of the Dream, could not shelter such abject, gruesome looking places and people. Most Americans seemed to live under permanent influence of Soma pills, and to live by the motto "*Great is truth, but still greater, from a practical point of view, is silence about truth*¹⁸." Given this massive denial of a harsh reality, these photographs were rejected as too critical of the nation, at a time when criticism was seen as unpatriotic, as Robert Frank soon noticed; "This is really a free country. There is only one thing you should not do, criticize anything¹⁹."

¹⁶ Jean Beaudrillard writes « Les Etats-Unis, c'est l'utopie réalisée », author's translation "The United States is a utopia realized" in Jean Beaudrillard, *Amérique*, (Paris : Editions Grasset et Fasquelle, 1986), 77

¹⁷ James Guidmond, *American Photography and the American Dream*, 222

¹⁸ Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*, (New York, London, Harper & Bros, 1946), xix

¹⁹ Robert Frank, Letter to his parents, 1947, in Anne Tucker and Philip Brookman, *Robert Frank : New York to Nova Scotia*, (Boston: Bulfinch Press, 1986),14

The underlying utopia in these photographs lies in their potential to force America into self-analysis, for its people to open up their eyes to the dark side of reality obscured by the illusion of the Dream and eventually demand radical changes after Frank, Klein and Erwitte's photographs had visually whispered "Is this the dream? Is this the kind of world you want to live in?" Consequently, the photograph by implying that "it does not have to be like this" provides a powerful social criticism, a photographic catharsis intended to stir a reaction of some sort as mentioned by Robert Frank in a US annual interview: "I do not anticipate that the on-looker will share my viewpoint. However, I feel that if my photograph leaves an image on his mind-something has been accomplished²⁰".

Triggering a reaction, even a negative one, would indeed drag the viewer out of general apathy and provoke him into reconsidering the state of reality he has long taken for granted and immutable. Even the most violent reactions to Frank's or Klein's photographs would spark off debates which were going to animate and sometimes inflame most of the sixties, all boiling down to one central question "What do you want America to be?"

Utopia on the verge of realization : photographing the near-future

All, too, will bear in mind this sacred principle, that though the will of the majority is in all cases to prevail, that will to be rightful must be reasonable; that the minority possess their equal rights, which equal law must protect, and to violate would be oppression²¹.

Thomas Jefferson

When the buds of utopia open up, allowing the darkness of fantasy to grow into reality, the result is what could be called a *utopia on the verge of realization*. This concept finds its root in Mannheim's terminology, who coined potentially realizable utopias as *Relative Utopia*²² (as opposed to what he called *Absolute Utopia*: utopia

²⁰ as mentioned in James Guidmond, *American Photography and the American dream*, 209

²¹ Thomas Jefferson, *First Inaugural Address*, reproduced in Paul Finkelman and Bruce Lesh, *Milestone Documents in American History: Exploring the Primary Sources That Shaped America: 1763-1823*, (Dallas : Schlager Group, 2008), 381

²² Karl Mannheim, *Idéologie et l'Utopie*, Trans. Pauline Rollet, ed Jean-Marie Tremblay, retrieved from

whose realization is impossible either in the present or in the future). Borrowing from Thomas Paine's famous formula, the photograph then shows us that "the birthday of a new world is at hand²³." By that we mean that the photographer chooses to show scenes, people and situations which foreshadow or indicate that a society is changing; that yesterday's utopias are in the process of their own realization.

Here of course we need to remember that "one person's utopia may be another person's hell²⁴." In regard to the political forces at work in sixties America, we will refer, in Mannheim's terms, to two opposite socio-political visions: the conservative utopia and the humanitarian-liberal utopia. Mannheim considers conservatism as utopian²⁵, because it seeks to restore the past in the present. For the conservatives, change is negative and individual liberty dangerous as they pave the way to anarchism²⁶. On the other hand, humanitarian-liberal utopias put their emphasis on equality and freedom for all; they believe in the power of education and intelligence, so much that they sometimes naively reject the very notions of money, private property and hierarchy²⁷. The American society of the late fifties and sixties saw these two forms of utopia collide and oppose each other on several grounds. When one talks about utopia in the sixties, one generally refers to the liberal-humanitarian utopia, which especially pervaded the counterculture. Indeed as Mannheim explains, it is

http://www.google.fr/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CCsQFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fclassiques.uqac.ca%2Fclassiques%2FMannheim_karl%2Fideologie_utopie%2Fideologie_utopie.doc&ei=ZD-QU8mHHKv40gXYzoAg&usg=AFQjCNHK6WGGliBa-Bj7PnPtDDcv-ODzKg&sig2=Dmrsa_SQKWNklGxEf5S11A&bvm=bv.68235269,d.d2k

²³ Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*, as reproduced in Paul Finkelman and Bruce Lesh, *Milestone Documents in American History: Exploring the Primary Sources That Shaped America: 1763-1823*, (Dallas : Schlager Group, 2008), 144

²⁴ Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, 25

²⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *L'idéologie et l'Utopie*, 362

²⁶ To make this point clear, for Karl Mannheim, conservatism is a utopia which does not consider itself as one, which even rejects utopias. Conservatism for Mannheim thinks of itself as having conquered a reality that it must preserve from change, which can indeed be seen as utopian since history is precisely marked by changes and evolution. Mannheim writes "La mentalité conservatrice comme telle n'a pas d'utopie. Idéalement, elle est, dans sa structure même, complètement en harmonie avec la réalité dont elle a, pour le moment, conquis la maîtrise » author's translation "conservative mentality has in itself no utopias. Ideally, it is, in its very structure, completely in harmony with the state of reality it has, for now, mastered" in Karl Mannheim, *Idéologie et Utopie*, 104

²⁷ *ibid.* 365

always, the dominant group, which determines what must be labelled utopian²⁸.

America being widely conservative at the time –contrary to what is generally thought, even among the youth²⁹-, the media and politicians especially, labelled most of sixties movements and activists “utopians”- the Port Huron Statement and the following youth movement, the Woodstock nation, the Hippies, the Yippies as well as the peace movement of the late sixties and so on were utopians seeking to transform conservative America into a more liberal America. We will therefore use the term utopian to refer to humanitarian-liberal visions in sixties photography.

Utopia in sixties photography of Winogrand and Arbus especially leaked through photographs portraying people, behaviors and situations which looked uncommon, bizarre or transgressing mainstream social or moral codes. Photographs picturing utopias on the verge of realization were particularly numerous in the sixties, precisely because the American society was undergoing fundamental transformations in the field of mores especially.

Diane Arbus' *Seated Man in a Bra and Stockings (1967)* and *Woman with a cigar (1965)* are examples of a utopia on the verge of realization. They picture attitudes- a man wearing women's clothes, and a woman smoking a cigar – which are subversive in their reversal of gender codes. However, in Arbus' *Seated Man in a bra and Stockings* the man seems quite at ease, his intense glance staring right at the viewer is almost defying us not to look away and accept what we see. On the other hand, the woman seems indifferent of the camera, as if others' opinion did not matter after all. By focusing exclusively on them in the portrait style, Arbus excludes passers-by, friends, family members from the visual field and with it the notion of

²⁸ « C'est toujours le groupe dominant, en plein accord avec l'ordre existant, qui détermine ce qui doit être considéré comme utopique, tandis que le groupe ascendant, en conflit avec les choses telles qu'elles existent, est celui qui détermine ce qui est jugé comme idéologique » ; author's translation “It is always the dominant group which determines what shall be regarded as utopian accordingly to the existing order, while the dominated group, being in conflict with the state of things is the one which determines what shall be regarded as ideological” in Karl Mannheim, *Idéologie et Utopie*, 81

²⁹ In *the Movement*, Terry Anderson notes that conservative students left the National Students Association which was judged too liberal and created their own association on Barry Golwater's advice. SDS conservative counterpart became *Young American for Freedom* with John Wayne, Ronald Reagan as their sponsors. Anderson also mentions that throughout the decade YAF counted more members than SDS or SNCC. See Terry Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995)

judgment. The viewer is left alone with them, and is free to imagine worlds in which these two characters would be freed from the moral shackles of their time. These pictures seem suspended in time, as if the characters in Arbus' frame belonged to the near future, when gender lines could be almost entirely crossed.

Arbus' *Friends at home* is another of her most controversial photographs. We see what looks like a young boy and a mature woman embracing each other. The picture seems shocking enough without knowing that the boy is in fact a very androgynous woman; that we are looking at a lesbian couple, who recently had sex as suggested by the unmade bed to which Arbus chose to dedicate half of her frame. The two women look relaxed and comfortable with each other even in front of the camera, as if away from others' judgment, in the confine intimate space of their own bedroom they could aspire to a sense of normalcy and peace. Winogrand's *Central Park Zoo*, (1962), as well as Arbus' *Young man and his pregnant wife in Washington square*, (1965) both tackle the still sensitive- not to say taboo- subject of mixed relationship between a white woman and a black male at a time when so-called "anti-miscegenation" laws were still enforced in most southern states (they would only be invalidated as unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 1967 *Loving v Virginia* landmark case). Winogrand and Arbus by choosing to photograph this forbidden or shameful type of relationship transgress moral borders and traditional decorum. Both photographs debunk some of the most deeply-rooted clichés pervading American representations of mixed relationships. For instance, the monkey in Winogrand's photographs is reminiscent of absurd clichés about the degeneration of the "white race" and more generally of the white supremacy. As if mixed marriages were to blur the race line and eventually trigger a sort of regression of the human race back to its Darwinian monkey origins. Arbus' photograph is in itself "multi-subversive", it first implicitly states the gap between northern and deep-southern states' diverging regulations on mixed marriages as the title makes clear that the couple is married, as well as expecting a child- a vision of horror for most white supremacists. Secondly, the woman looks bigger than her husband, which again blurs the lines of gender stereotypes, and triggers a deconstruction, a reevaluation of what a couple should be like³⁰. These three un-traditional couples seem to state that love and desire is neither

³⁰ Transgression of gender codes in Diane Arbus' photographs is discussed at length by Ariella Budick, in *Diane Arbus, Gender and Politics*, History of Photography, Vol 19, Number 2, Summer 1995, 123–126

up to any political body nor public opinion to decide upon, that they are above law and judgment. Arbus' photographs indeed imply that if our sex is defined by nature at birth, our gender, and the person we love, should be a matter of choice and personality, and not be imposed by society's standards. Ariella Budick writes that by "presenting these un-American demons as alternatives to the generic everyfamily in the popular press, Arbus staked a claim for another way of life that could tolerate the ambiguity of diversity³¹."

The ambiguity of diversity is best epitomized in Winogrand's picture, *New York World's fair (1964)*, which is just another vision of a *utopia on the verge of realization*. In it, we see exactly eight people sitting on a bench, two men at the extremities, and five young women at the center; which visually questions the very notion of a male-centered society. A young black male is talking to a white woman, while at the other end of the bench two young women are looking over an old white man's shoulder reading his newspaper. The three other young women in the middle are talking to each other, seemingly gossiping about something. All together, they form a human chain, like that of Robert Frank's in *American Trolley*, but here what emanates from the whole picture is an impression of general cheerfulness. The care-free attitude of the women who outnumber the men on the bench, their proximity, seems to counterbalance the oppressive atmosphere of Frank's picture. This small "bench society" seems to have recovered the ability to communicate. Therefore the sense of alienation; of imprisonment and estrangement that we had in Frank's picture seems to have disappeared. Winogrand's picture is inviting us to imagine this bench as a microcosm symbolical of a larger macrocosm where everyone would be able to peacefully cohabit and communicate with his neighbor, despite race, gender, age or social class boundaries – offering a vision of New York's emerging "fair world".

What is utopian in these pictures is not the birth of diversity, for it had always existed. What is utopian is for this diversity of human beings to be accepted within and without the picture, to be acknowledged and eventually absorbed by majority's standards instead of remaining forever ignored and rejected to the margin fringe of society. The utmost utopian vision being for these different human-beings to mix with one another freely as in Winogrand's *New-York world's fair*.

³¹ Ariella Budick, *Diane Arbus, Gender and Politics*, History of Photography, Vol 19, Number 2, Summer 1995, 123–126

As Guidmond mentions, “when we look at a photograph of social significance, made in a ‘documentary style’, we often see a serious effort to (...) translate an idea of what America should (or should not) be into the visual fact of a photographic image in as truthful a way as possible³².” Therefore the documentary picture becomes a commentary, an implicit piece of advice or criticism addressed to a country and its people. If America wanted to live up to its ideal, as expressed in Thomas Jefferson’s inauguration speech, one of equality and protection for everyone belonging to a minority, then Arbus and Winogrand among others remind us that diversity and differences still disturb us. The utopian ideal, which lies behind such photographs, is the assimilation and acceptance of differences within the grand American family. In other words, what pictures displaying *utopia on the verge of realization* are implicitly saying is, in Bob Dylan’s words that “The order is rapidly fading, For the times they are a-changin’.”

Photographing a “utopia realized” –Woodstock, 1969.

In terms of classification, pictures taken at Woodstock would rather belong to a third category of photographs displaying a “utopia realized”- if only for a moment.

Burk Uzzle’s series *Woodstock 1969* shows the birth of a small temporary world made of mud, love and mutual aid. In an interview with Mr. Uzzle, he said what he liked to photograph best while on the site were “The women, the men, undressed on the sides of the pond. It all felt primordial³³.” The nakedness was indeed one of the most powerful signs of freedom displayed at Woodstock, as if the “de-conditioning” dear to counter-culturists was being completed. By taking off their clothes, festival attendees were symbolically getting rid of their education, conventions, and decorum, away from the right-thinking America. They were re-envisaging life in their own terms as Woodstock became an open door onto another possible world. Mr. Uzzle even describes Woodstock as a decisive moment in history which transformed American culture:

My sense of it was that all of us there figured out we had to make the best of the situation, and it was clear that we had to "get along with each other" since

³² James Guidmond, *American photography and the American Dream*, 18

³³ A-C. Bondon, personal communication with Burk Uzzle, March 10, 2014

there was no "law and order" other than very direct person to person relationship... The lack of violence clearly was a surprise to everyone, and I realize now that Woodstock represented the moment when American culture, at that moment in history, "turned on a dime" as we say - very clearly changed.³⁴

Woodstock, for three days, encompassed the alternative America many had wished to build- it had the participatory democracy SDS had longed for, along with the hedonism Hippies stood for and the pacifism of anti-war activists, as well as a sense of absolute freedom the sex-drugs-and-rock-and-roll culture had helped popularized. Woodstock was an insight into what America could be, the moment 'culture changed', because it symbolized a clear rupture between two opposite visions of America, which would irremediably give way to what James Davidson Hunter has coined as a *Culture War*.

Pictures taken at Woodstock by Uzzle but also by rock photographers like Elliott Landy or Jim Marshall, as well as Life photographers John Dominis or Bill Eppridge are important not only because they enable new generations to remember the past, but because "they keep open for the viewer the possibility of another future. And it is this possibility to think of a different future, and to imagine the future differently, that is the condition of political action³⁵." Woodstock photographs therefore function both as reminder of a utopia realized as well as –at least for the *liberal-humanitarians*- a suggestion of a "vision to be pursued".

Conclusion

A picture never changed the price of eggs.
But a picture can change our dreams; and
pictures may in time clarify our values. The
power of artists is precisely the influence
they wield over the fantasies of their
public³⁶.

-Alan Kaprow

Once a utopia-generating photograph is taken and disclosed, it acts like dozens of open doors, which the viewer's imagination is free to explore. Utopia then becomes

³⁴ *ibid.*

³⁵ Ulrich Baer, *Seeing the Future in an Image from the Past: Hannah Arendt, Garry Winogrand, and Photographing the World*, *The Yearbook of Comparative Literature*, Volume 55, 2009, pp. 226-263

³⁶ Alan Kaprow, "The artist as a man of the world" -1964, in *Essay on the Blurring of Art and Life*, (London : University of California Press, 2003), 53

the prism through which reality is to be rethought and its presence denotes a social comment, or a strong criticism of the reality it seeks to transform.

As Kaprow mentioned though, art has never changed the price of eggs, and photography certainly hasn't and won't change the world for the better on its own. But if we conceive of progress as resulting from many different factors, then photography and the state of reality it depicts or seeks to change can be efficient in instigating meaningful changes.

If Susan Sontag was right in saying that “Art changes morals- that body of psychic custom and public sanctions that draws a vague boundary between what is emotionally and spontaneously intolerable and what is not³⁷”, then the association of utopia and photography might have contributed its part in the evolution of morals in the sixties. Of course it is almost impossible to evaluate the influence of Arbus in the progressive acceptance of homosexuality as just another form of sexuality, or transsexuality as a choice and not a perversity. It is difficult to evaluate the impact of Robert Frank's series *the Americans* in the rebellion against the white-male-centered American society that was to erupt in the sixties, but seeing repeatedly disturbing or utopian looking pictures of the present and even of the past can make one question the state of reality one lives in. In the end, utopia in American photography always goes back to American ideals being unachieved, and asks, “how much longer will it take?” The implicit answer which seems to resonate in Riis and Hine's photographs as well as in Lange, Frank, Klein or Arbus' being “Well, it's up to you”.

However, photography talks to people differently; what can be mind-opening for some will surely be repulsive and deviant for others. For the conservative the counterculture and liberal-humanitarian ideals it sheltered were purely dystopian, such pictures as Arbus' were literally spat at in museums³⁸ while Frank's “*The Americans*” as well as Klein's 1956 “*New York*” series were rejected several times for publication in the US. The American society had traditionally been one of assimilation, never too keen on opening up to diversity of opinion as Tocqueville had

³⁷ Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, (New York : Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1977), 41

³⁸ “When 3 of Arbus' images were first shown at the Museum of Modern Art in 1965, Yuben Yee, one of the Museum's librarians, had to come in early every morning to wipe the spit from them”, in James Guidmond, *American photography and the American Dream*, 221

already noticed in the 1840s³⁹ and this sudden burst of differences, moral transgressions and equal claims seems to have disturbed and divided Americans about what America should be as the subsequent “culture wars” translated.

It is not our job to state which of the conservative or humanitarian-liberal idea is right and deserves complete realization. As a general remark though we can simply state that history has repeatedly taught us that selective utopias (utopias which select and organize their members along hierarchical lines) as well as standardizing utopias (utopias which level off differences and thus ignore people’s particularities and uniqueness) are nothing but dangerous dystopias. In that sense, real progress would be that which includes all and rejects no one, but which -especially- manages to make sense of differences.

Finally, if sixties photographs and the utopias they sometimes sheltered are still relevant in the context of the 21st century, it is certainly because these pictures, and the utopias they contained, the questions they raised are still worth reflecting upon today. Such issues as sexism, homo and transphobia, as well as racism are still recurrent worldwide and make headlines almost every day. Even though the rights of minorities and that of women have incredibly improved since Arbus’ or Frank’s photos were taken, they remind us that the struggle isn’t won, that the sixties countercultural ideal of brotherhood embracing pluralism and personal freedom has not been fully reached- and, ultimately, they do remind us that there are still quite a few miles to walk on the long and winding road to Paradise Garden.

³⁹ « Je ne connais pas de pays où il règne en général moins d’indépendance d’esprit et de véritable liberté de discussion qu’en Amérique. », commonly translated as “I know of no country where there is so little independence of mind and real freedom of discussion as in America” in Alexis de Tocqueville, *De la démocratie en Amérique*, (Paris : Editions Gallimard, 1968), 150