

*Critical Focus:*

A.D. COLEMAN

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## **Defining the Peaks among the Plain**

Bill Jay

If an electrocardiogram were attached to the body of contemporary critical writing about photography, the signs of life would be meagre indeed. The screen would project the flat line of near-death with only a few sharp peaks to indicate that there is the faintest hope of recovery.

Most of the highest and brightest peaks are being generated by the writings of A.D. Coleman.

Peaks can be defined only in contrast to the surrounding plains so it is worth expending a few words on the dearth of fine critical writing in photography in order to see Coleman more clearly.

In the past couple of decades a new type of critic, and therefore a new type of critical writing, has dominated the medium. And, yes, I do mean "dominated" if the periodicals under review are restricted to those which purport to service the more serious, fine-art aspects of photography. This will come as no surprise to those of you reading these words. Because I am ever-anxious to appear judicious, tempered in my responses, surpassingly fair to the sensitivities of my colleagues and balanced in my appraisals, I will merely assert that the new-critic is an academic hack of minor attainment whose motivating force is self-aggrandizement through the regurgitation of shallow ideologies presented in graceless, tortured prose of utter incomprehensibility and sprinkled with irrelevant quotations from third-rate French philosophers.

As we are all aware there is a predatory instinct in a small, but seemingly growing, segment of the public - the idea that things (money, possessions, power) should be entitlements, handed over without payment in hard work, commitment to clear goals, the risk of failure or any investment in time and care- Muggers, for example.

The photographic equivalents are intellectual muggers, known as academic critics. Many of them have no commitment to communication, have no interest in learning the craft of clear writing (or thinking), have no generosity of spirit or love of photography, have no hard-won life-attitude which encompasses the medium, have no respect for their readers or humility in their positions of power. Instead they are quick to identify the victim, whether person or issue, and bludgeon it into insensibility with the blunt instruments of pseudo-intellectual jargon and dull wittedness (and a conspicuous and characteristic lack of good humor) while they bask in the approving glances of their fellow gangsters and smirk at their Rightness.

The medium's periodicals which pretend to the more thoughtful band of the photographic spectrum are full of writings by individuals who do not work at the craft of criticism, but presume that the opportunity to express their prejudices and ideologies is an entitlement, not a hard-won responsibility.

Against this background, the achievements of A.D. Coleman stand out in sharp relief.

Why? Just what is it about him that deserves your respect and attention, if not your agreement on every issue?

The succinct answer is that Coleman, in his writings as in his life, consistently displays a deeply felt photographic "conscience", a sense of the moral imperative, a conscious intent towards what is right and good. I write these words with some trepidation, in the knowledge they are apt to prompt the gagging reflex in the cynical and jaded, and in the awareness that A.D. himself might disavow such heady aspirations. Nevertheless, I am convinced this "conscience" is not only evident in all his works but also an essential prerequisite for all works of importance, irrespective of the medium or field. A reviewer of A.D. Coleman's

first collection of essays was seemingly disturbed that "In terms of its literary genre, *Light Readings* approaches the personal journal...[it] is biographical." Precisely. The essays are suffused with a deeply felt life-attitude, and this awareness of authorship presumes a willingness to take moral stands on issues which, in turn, demands a personal courage which is singularly lacking in others who might, indeed, find such a conscience intimidating.

These personal imperatives are not overt but implicit in the text, because Coleman is too busy in the proper business of the critic. W.H.Auden has defined the functions of the critic in such a succinct list (*The Dyer's Hand*, Random House, 1948) that it bears repeating. The critic, says Auden, "can do me one or more of the following services":

1. Introduce me to authors or works of which I was hitherto unaware.
2. Convince me that I have undervalued an author or a work because I had not read them carefully enough.
3. Show me relations between works of different ages and cultures which I could never have seen for myself because I do not know enough and never shall.
4. Give a "reading" of a work which increases my understanding of it.
5. Throw light upon the process of artistic "Making."
6. Throw light upon the relation of art to life, to science, economics, ethics, religion, etc.

I would challenge anyone to name another critic in the medium of photography who fulfils as many of Auden's functions as A.D. Coleman.

There is an interesting reason for this uniqueness: Coleman's beginnings were in the areas of play-writing, poetry and music. Although he is now a full-time professional critic, these talents are still avocations and remain the literary background of his observations on photography. Most fine critics of the past were primarily photographers who espoused and advocated particular and personal rationales for their image-making. Although these observations were often astute and convincing, of necessity they were narrow of focus.

Not since the Photo Secession has a critic emerged from outside the ranks of photographers who has committed himself with such verve to the medium of photography - and brought to his writings the benefits and insights of a broad literary perspective.

Since 1968 Coleman has breathed fresh air into the otherwise moribund corpse of photographic criticism and almost single-handedly kept its spirits alive.

Trust me. Read him.