



A Photographic Consciousness: Light and Darkness in the Work of Paul-Henri Bourguignon

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I. The Medium of the Camera

*Denn die einen sind im Dunkeln,
Und die andern sind im Licht,
Und man siehet die im Lichte,
Die im Dunkeln sieht man nicht.*

*For some men live in darkness,
While others stand in the light.
We see those in the light,
While the others fade from sight.*

—Bertolt Brecht, final verse
to “The Ballad of Mack the Knife”
for the film version
of *The Threepenny Opera*¹

At the time Paul-Henri Bourguignon began his career as a painter early in the twentieth century, many scholars, critics, and curators regarded the camera chiefly as a technological adjunct to the process of artistic creation—a mechanical sketch book, an instrument for keeping records, a device for collecting artifacts, or a vehicle for the mass communication of images—but not yet as the tool of a unique branch of art. Thus it took some years, for example, before the photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson—trained initially as a painter—gained recognition for his seminal contribution not only to the history of journalism but also to the history of art. Ultimately, in the years immediately after the Second World War, a growing number of art historians began to approach the works of Cartier-Bresson and those of his professional contemporaries as the creations of image makers who—just as much as painters—concerned themselves with the problems of composition and construction, with the adjustment of form to content, and with conscious strategies for bringing to view what had previously gone

Bourguignon’s Zeiss
Ikon Camera



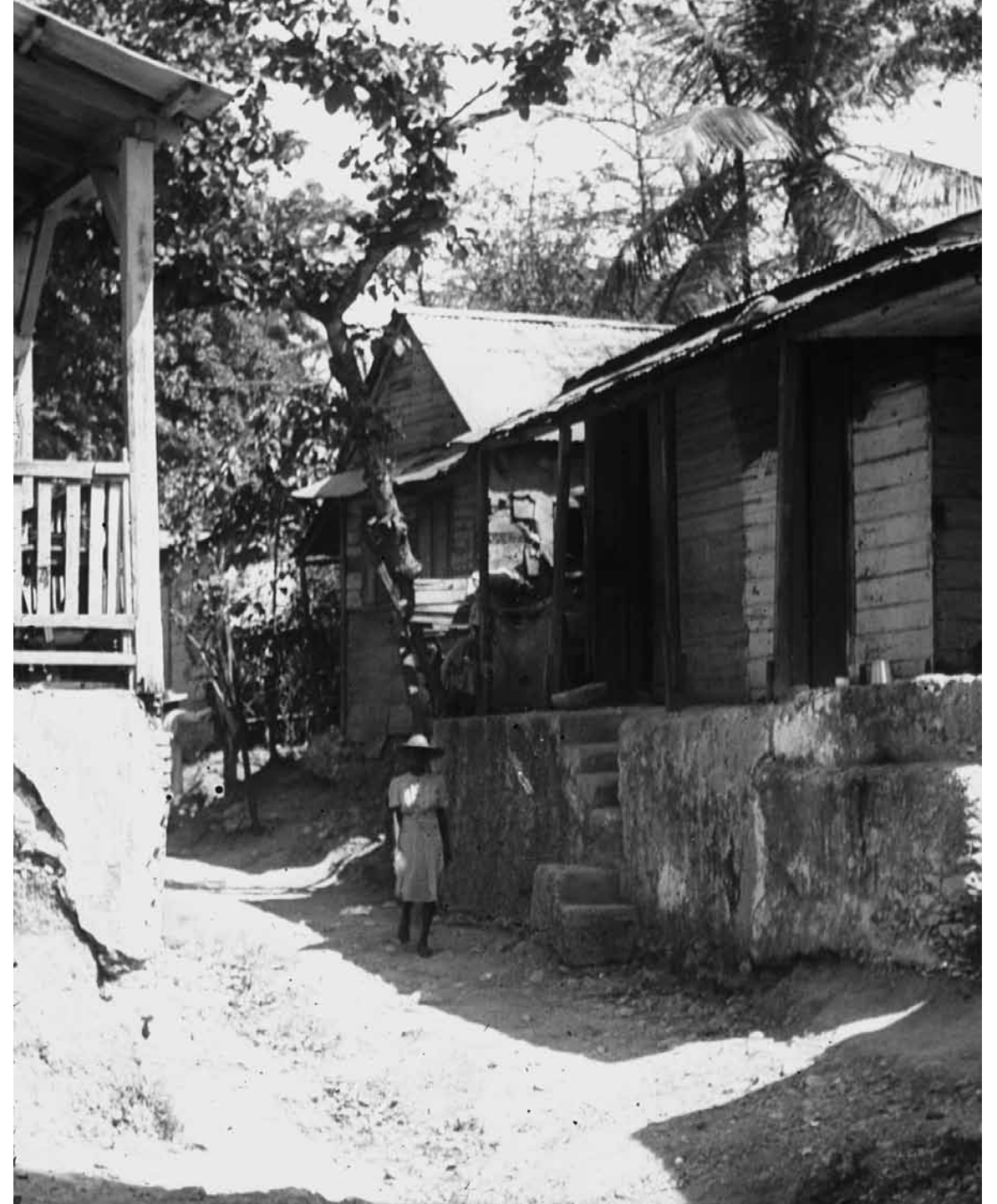
Lorgina, a prominent vodou priestess in Haiti, 1947

unremarked or unnoticed.² Bourguignon—who worked not only as a painter but also as a journalist—provides a revealing example of an artist who at a crucial moment in his career and at a pivotal time in the reception of photography as a branch of art explored the camera’s potential as a medium of both visual and social communication.

While on journeys to Southern and Eastern Europe before the Second World War, Bourguignon had already begun to test the camera’s possibilities; it was, however, during his postwar travels to Haiti (May 1947–July 1948) and Peru (July 1948–July 1950) that he explored its potential most deliberately and extensively. In particular, he employed it to evoke the constant presence and dynamic interaction of two opposing realities: the one accessible to light, the other confined by darkness. Bourguignon, the painter and journalist, traveled along the dividing lines between those two realities, using his black-and-white Zeiss Ikon camera to convey the perceptual and societal relationships that existed between them. His photographs encompassed the daily routines, the physical surroundings, the material livelihoods, the spiritual atmosphere, and the natural landscape of Haitian and Peruvian societies. Regarded as a whole, his images comprised a cultural and social geography of the two nations, depicting not only the tenacious struggle for existence on the streets and on the land, but also the deep sense of personal, inward isolation that could afflict persons engaged in that struggle and the integral sense of self and community that combated such isolation.³

II. Bourguignon’s Haitian and Peruvian Photographs

In Haiti, Bourguignon brought the camera to both the street and the hillside. We have, for example, the photograph of a woman walking along a narrow, descending dirt road within the angular shadows cast by the houses to one side of the path. On the right, porch steps turn sharply up to a doorway that remains lost in darkness; on the left, a broken railing and slats line the opposite porch; and across the picture, a harsh light cuts through and into the street. Within



Haiti, 1947

that scene, the straightforward external countenance and inward self-possession of the woman walking in shadow produce an emphatic contrast. In another photo of a half-lit street we can see in the hillside shacks some of the features—variously outlined by the light and shade—that caught the eye of the photographer and painter. The flattened, linear corrugations of the boards and the sweeping, trapezoidal



Haiti, 1947

roofs that the photograph captures seem already to verge on qualities that will interest the painter in his later work.

Two companion views of the Presidential Palace in the capital, Port-au-Prince, powerfully convey Bourguignon's awareness of the contrasts that confronted him in Haiti. In fact, the history of the palace itself offers a study in searing contrasts. The residence no longer exists: irreparably damaged by the 2010 earthquake, it was finally demolished at the end of 2012. Designed before the First World War by the French-trained Haitian architect Georges H. Baussan, the structure was completed by U.S. Navy engineers during the United States' occupation of Haiti after that war. Ultimately, within a decade after Bourguignon composed these two images, the corrupt and brutal Duvalier dictatorship installed itself within the palace walls.⁴

In the first of Bourguignon's photographs, the white cupolas of the palace catch the light that crosses the naturally carved hills in the background and whose worn and step-like appearance mirrors that of the stone stairs leading up to the porches in the left foreground. Shacks along the hillside that spread out at a distance from the front of the palace frame

the photograph and draw the viewer's attention specifically to the woman emerging only in half-light onto the porch to the immediate left and the man returning into a darkened doorway to the immediate right. For the second picture from this diptych of the palace, Bourguignon established his position as photographer downward and to the left. Now the walls of the hillside homes frame the Presidential residence more tightly. Equally important, they frame the silhouette of a small boy who, with left hand on hip, stares intently in the direction of the sea, beyond the severely lit palace and beyond the outline of the narrowed frame. The tree branches that extend between the walls and divide the image of the boy from that of the palace—and which were absent from the first photograph—now give the boy's location the aspect of a wired enclosure. Bringing to view the youth's thoughts of escape to the sea, the picture calls to mind the similar ambition that inspired Antoine Doinel, François Truffaut's young, isolated hero and alter-ego confined to a youth detention center in *The 400 Blows*, a film made little more than ten years after Bourguignon took this photograph.⁵

Haiti, 1948



Haiti, 1948





Peru, 1950

The fate of children again became the subject of Bourguignon's photography in Peru, as in his picture of young children and older youths seated or standing in a shaded doorway beneath a heavy stone lintel, apparent outcasts from the world. Through a receding perspective, the viewer follows the children from the harsh sun of the street into the partial shadows beneath the lintel and finally into the almost complete darkness of the doorway. The child who sits nearest the street and most completely within the light appears to have withdrawn into herself, lost—or imprisoned—in an internal reverie. Behind her, two seated young women and the boy standing within the shadow of the doorway direct their attention externally toward the photographer, marking him as present in that location at that moment. Similarly, the photograph of the man looking for work in the town of Ayacucho in the Peruvian highlands pivots crucially around the direction of the subject's eyes. Virtually monochromatic, they turn deeply into the self, yet simultaneously confront the photographer and identify his presence, fixing him to that place and time: their introverted focus does not suppress their self-assertion and even defiance. Eyes that simultaneously convey reflection and confrontation will reappear in Bourguignon's later paintings and drawings.

Ayacucho, Peru, 1950



III. A Photographic Consciousness

Beginning with his early commitment to Belgian Expressionism, Bourguignon experimented continuously with color, not only in his paintings but also—as the title indicates—in his novel *The Greener Grass*, written in 1960 and published posthumously in 1993.⁶ In his artwork, changes in the representation and construction of colors marked Bourguignon's life experiences, his reactions to them, and perhaps most importantly his transformations of those experiences. His wife, the psychological anthropologist Erika Bourguignon, whom he first met in Haiti, reminds us that his experiments as a painter often reflected a repeated reassembling and reworking of distant perceptions and memories.⁷

That point receives emphasis in *The Greener Grass*, which Bourguignon set in postwar Haiti and Peru. Toward the end of the novel, the Italian inventor and con man assembles from memory a series of urban scenes of Genoa, which the Belgian narrator presents simultaneously like a list of paintings: the lighting of street lamps, a boat leaving the harbor, boys hawking newspapers, a girl entering a café, an unseen beggar playing a far-off violin.⁸ At this moment in the story, the imaginary catalog represents what was for Bourguignon the organic connection between artistic creation and the process of remembering. In the episodic novel, Bourguignon ultimately presents artwork as perhaps the only authentic type of remembrance: it reattached meaning to experiences that inevitably become detached from their roots in time and place. In the period when he wrote *The Greener Grass*, or very soon after, Bourguignon in fact began to use his photographs to assist and even generate his processes of remembering and creating.⁹ In paintings and drawings of Haiti and Peru, many composed years after he traveled there, Bourguignon undertook the continual work of recalling and reconstructing memory. The activity of painting in turn stirred a renewed process of recollection.

In the case of Bourguignon, then, we find that the perception and memory of a painter combines not only with the observations of a journalist but also with the activity of a photographer, an activity that reflects its own type of consciousness. The act of photography in the moment that the photographer takes the picture represents an immediate



Port-au-Prince, Haiti, 1947
(Erika Eichhorn on left)



Port-au-Prince, Haiti, 1947



Steep Street, Port-au-Prince, 1970, gouache

reaction to the world. In Cartier-Bresson's words, it reflects a type of choice: "the decision made by the eye."¹⁰ In Haiti and Peru, Bourguignon employed the camera as that medium with which he could respond immediately to what he observed as both an artist and journalist and through which he could depict the structure of perception and the dynamics of society. With its unique sensitivity to the gradations and influences—and absence—of light, the camera provided the essential instrument for identifying and communicating that visual structure and societal dynamic.

Photography in the moment, however, also indicates an effort—planned or unplanned—to situate oneself within the world of the present. To that end, the subjects in front of the camera lens play a crucial role: as the photographer captures their image, they in turn fix the photographer in that particular place and time. The result is that the photograph, as in the case of Bourguignon's pictures, acquires tactile and even kinesthetic qualities beyond the visual. Those qualities of tangibility and movement, which appear with particular significance in his Haitian and Peruvian photographs, repeat themselves not only in his paintings but also in his drawings, which are notable for the texture and pressure of their lines and contrasts and which give further evidence of the mutual influence that operated between his painting, drawing, and photography.

Finally, what can one say here about the connection between photographic consciousness and social vision? Does the use of photography generate particular perceptions of society or does the confrontation with social problems initiate a turn to photography? Here the answer to such questions must be that photographic consciousness and social awareness exist in a dynamic relationship to each other, an interaction that defines a transformation in art in the twentieth century and that characterized the work of Paul-Henri Bourguignon in

Haiti and Peru. The camera as an instrument of both artistic expression and social communication has a unique capacity to convey the contrasts and oppositions that compose both visual perception and social reality. It draws our attention—as did Brecht—to the modern meanings of being blessed with access to light and being condemned by confinement to darkness. It demonstrates to us that our perceptions derive not only from a series of sensations but also from a set of choices.

¹ Bertolt Brecht, *Die Dreigroschenoper* (Leipzig: Verlag Philipp Reclam, 1977), p. 106. G. W. Pabst (director), *Die Dreigroschenoper* (Nero, Tobis-Klangfilm, Warner Brothers, 1931; trans. Chris Angermann and John Gudelij, Praesens-Film AG and The Criterion Collection, 2007). Paul-Henri Bourguignon saw the French-language version of the film at the time of its release.

² Peter Galassi and E. H. Gombrich were among those art historians to emphasize Cartier-Bresson's photography as defining a new branch of art. See, for example, Peter Galassi, *Henri Cartier-Bresson: The Early Work* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1987), 9–50, and E. H. Gombrich, "The Photographer as Artist (1978)," in Gombrich, *Topics for Our Time: Twentieth-Century Issues in Learning and in Art* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), 198–210. See also Pierre Assouline, *Henri Cartier-Bresson: A Biography*, trans. David Wilson (London: Thames & Hudson, 2005), 228–29 and 231–32.

³ Bourguignon's photographs are preserved in the Paul-Henri Bourguignon Photograph Collection in the Rare Books and Manuscripts division of the Ohio State University Libraries. See <http://library.osu.edu/projects/bourguignon-photos/index-bourguignon.html>.

⁴ See, for example, "Reconstruction of Haiti's National Palace to Begin Wednesday," *The Sentinel*, August 21, 2012, accessed online at <http://www.sentinel.ht/politics/articles/presidential/3297-reconstruction-of-haiti-s-national-palace-to-begin>; and "Pride and Palaces," *The Economist*, September 14, 2012, accessed online at <http://www.economist.com/blogs/americasview/2012/09/haiti>.

⁵ François Truffaut (director), *The 400 Blows* (Les Films du Carrosse, 1959).

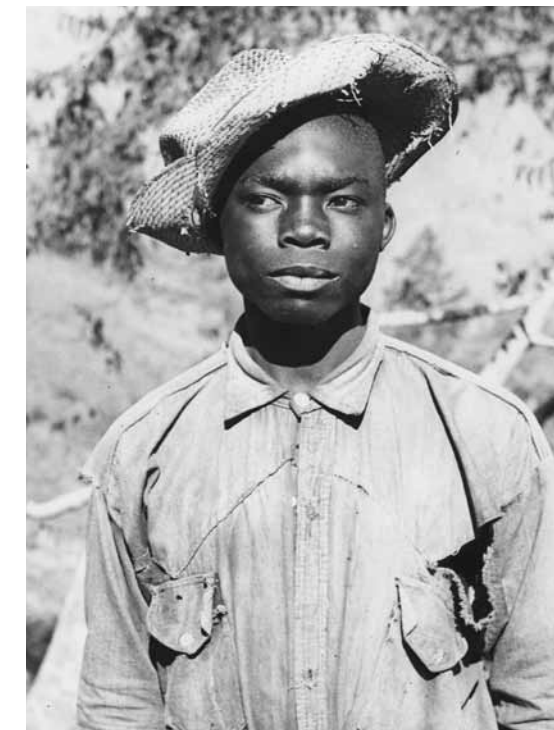
⁶ Paul Bourguignon, *The Greener Grass* (Rockville, MD: Ariadne Press, 1993).

⁷ Erika Bourguignon, "The Painter's Eye: Paul-Henri Bourguignon's Photographs," *American Imago*, vol. 70, no. 3 (Fall 2013): 357–83.

⁸ Paul Bourguignon, *The Greener Grass*, 199.

⁹ See Erika Bourguignon, "The Painter's Eye," passim.

¹⁰ Henri Cartier-Bresson, "The Decisive Moment," in *The Mind's Eye: Writings on Photography and Photographers* (New York: Aperture, 1999), 32.



Luc, Haiti, 1947



Luc, 1968, gouache