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Merton’s “Zen Camera” and Contemplative Photography

Christopher Meatyard

I am the appointed hour
The “now” that cuts
Time like a blade.
“Song: If You Seek”

If Thomas Merton and the photographer Ralph Eugene Meatyard were alive today and someone came up to them and asked if each would write something about the other, Gene and Tom would look at each other, grin, and roll with laughter. They were happy men. All the serious, momentous problems of the world could wait until the laughter subsided. In their own time they did comment on each other—“write” is too restrictive a word, for one wrote and the other photographed. No one needed to ask them to do it. It was their own business, their avocation, and they both had the good sense not to question themselves about it.

Common interests made Merton and Meatyard fast friends. Both were keenly interested in early Negro jazz, contemporary poetry, and Zen. They shared strong drink and impassioned conversation. Merton was especially attracted by a newfound possibility for profound visual expression communicated by the simple, direct medium of photography. Meatyard, on the other hand, was attracted to Merton by the monk’s uncommon, Christlike openness to the unpredictable manifestation of God’s will. Each man had worked hard for many years and had advanced a long way to be able to appreciate the diverse events which shaped one another’s lives. Merton and Meatyard were brothers, not from birth, but from their reciprocal awareness and recognition of a rebirth from common aesthetic and spiritual grounds. So interrelated were their interests that the qualities of one man’s work help to explain and interpret the other’s. Both sensed that preconceptions of the varied evidences and artifacts of existence work to blind the individual from a real and meaningful experience of universal humanity. Moreover, each felt that access to this experience was open to each person through contemplation.
And both, too, would be concerned that we should need to have their work explained, that we should find it anything more or less than self-evident. Our curiosity about them is heightened when we consider that Merton and Meatyard knew each other less than two years, at the end of their lives.

This article was begun in response to a question about the relationship of Ralph Eugene Meatyard to Thomas Merton. It expands somewhat beyond the narrow scope of that question to explore the commitment of Thomas Merton to photography and visual communication. Merton had much to say about both, but his statements and observations are scattered throughout his writings. This essay attempts to explore and relate a few of his insights as well as to interpret them, and to construct from them a kind of mosaic that forms a meditation about contemplative photography, an immeasurable dimension of photography that
inspired both Merton and Meatyard. Many pieces are missing, but we can begin to recover what was submerged in Merton's thoughts from the ideas that he projected in his poetry and prose.

Photographs tangibly link the present to very precise moments of the past. Conventional photography has become a vital part of our heritage, serving as a matrix for visual as well as conceptual memory. Contemplative photography, on the other hand, provides a mental, visual awareness which helps to express the process of an individual giving up his own identity in favor of a greater collective identity. The act of the contemplative can be reasserted
and rediscovered in the contemporary technology of photography in a way that goes beyond the influence of traditional iconography and in a way that goes beyond much of the production of conventional painters and sculptors. Contemplative photography extends the traditional role of the artist and permits a kind of visual reformation with a broader, less elitist, medium for spiritual expression—for Merton, we sense, an expression of the will of God.

It is important to note that Merton himself never developed a program as explicit as is stated here. In fact, he characteristically declared that he had no "program." I hope to make clear, however, that Merton’s involvement with the medium of photography shares something with the practice of Zen, a concept which itself develops no intricate dogmas. The topics of meditative photography and visual reformation in a Christian sense are complicated by Merton’s increasing curiosity about Zen. Zen, a school of Buddhism which originated in India and spread later to China and Japan, posits the intuitive awakening of transcendental awareness and wisdom through individual contemplation. In Japanese, the word “Zen” actually means meditation. Adoctrinal, Zen relies upon the individual himself to attain enlightenment.

Thomas Merton conducted a correspondence with D. T. Suzuki, one of the century’s foremost Zen scholars, author of three volumes of Essays in Zen Buddhism (1927-34) as well as The Training of a Zen Monk (1934) and A Manual of Zen Buddhism (1935). Fascinated by oriental thought, Merton himself authored works with titles like The Way of Chuang-Tzu (1965), Mystics and Zen Masters (1967), and Zen and the Birds of Appetite (1968).

While Merton states that he thinks the Catholic Church and Zen are compatible, even interrelated in a spiritual sense, many of his readers will, perhaps, be aroused by an appearing heterodoxy. Merton nevertheless believed that Zen can only strengthen the Christian’s understanding of, and relationship to, a world that is often openly hostile to the traditional forms of Christian expression. To illuminate Merton’s own changing regard for traditional forms of Christian expression we may parallel how his earlier naive view of photography evolved from a repulsion into an attraction, one important to his daily spiritual well-being.

Meatyard is historically pertinent to Merton’s activity as a photographer, for Merton admired Meatyard’s work. Meatyard, who supported his family as an optician, made Merton a pair of
eye-glasses for his Asian journey so that the traveling “witness” could have a conventional 20/20 acuity. (The glasses caught up with Merton via the post office.) The last time I saw my father and Merton together, a few days before Merton left for Asia, they discussed what Merton called the “Zen camera,” that other level of acuity which is a non-standard, non-institutionalized, inwardly free awareness. Merton, conscious of the proliferation of Japanese camera technology, perhaps savored the irony of a Christian monk viewing the world through the aperture of an eastern eye. Merton considered Meatyard’s photographs the most “visionary” examples of photography that he had ever seen, and in the time that the two were friends, the example of Meatyard’s photographs revived and strengthened in Merton a radically new awareness of photography.

Merton also referred to Meatyard’s photographs as “mythical.” In his Asian journal he wrote that the “best photography” should be aware of, and make full use of, the most challenging type of “illusions.” In most of Merton’s writing, the terms “illusion” and “myth” are reserved almost exclusively for derogation. But in the context of the anti-logic of Zen these terms evoke a way to blast the foundation of preconception. Myth is used to smoke out and confront myth, and illusion draws out and confronts illusion.

Many of Meatyard’s photographs of people record a figure either masked or blurred from motion during the exposure. His use of masks at once objectifies an entwining convention of portraiture: a sitter’s choice of pose and an artist’s individual style. The mask here suggests a cultural urge to scrutinize transcendental moments of time; the mask and the pose resist time’s fluidity. In contrast to his use of the mask, Meatyard photographed people in motion, recording the continuous flow of their action to convey the living flux of their identity. Conventional photography is a medium through which the photographer projects his will to possess and define objects. Contemplative photography, by contrast, is a nonprescriptive approach to discovering the balance between the objective and the subjective. In reviewing a photograph contemplatively inspired, we may rediscover the consummate relation between the subject and the object.

The potential scope and meditative practice of contemplative photography may be elaborated by reference to various passages in Merton’s writings. His photographs are another matter. Merton’s own images—the numerous ones that we seldom see, the
ones with garbage cans, construction sites, airplanes, restroom signs, telephone wires, and dilapidated houses deliberately juxtaposed against the "view"—share common elements with those of the photographer Robert Adams who, in the book The New West, observes: "Many have asked, pointing incredulously toward a sweep of tract homes and billboards, why picture that?"

Answering himself, Adams continues. "One reason is, of course, that we do not live in parks, that we need to improve things at home, and that to do it we have to see the facts without blinking." The assembled physical surfaces captured in photographs comprise the vehicle for the spiritually informed contemplative image, cosmetic or not. As individual artifacts they necessarily remain outside of the contemplative experience. Interpretively, these surfaces can still communicate through theology or Zen. The full measure of contemplative photography can only be experienced intuitively.

Except in his poetry and in some freewheeling letters, Merton always tries to be as coherent as possible in order to communicate the evasive thoughts and emotions of his particular spiritual insight. Meatyard's photographs, then, have the most in common with Merton's poetry, especially the later poetry, such as Cables to the Ace. Both Merton and Meatyard use the anti-logic of Zen to ambush and slough off the lazier reader and viewer. The deliberate ambiguity in Merton's later poems and in Meatyard's photographs is a teaching tool, and we will be obliged to consult the methods of Zen to appreciate them.

Merton and Meatyard differed in religious commitment—one was a Catholic monk, the other a Protestant layman. Nevertheless, they shared a common perspective. Both believed that God is Being itself, the pure act of existence; that everyone and everything is an extended part of God; that each is a "created attachment." Similarly, but long before he met Merton, Meatyard titled a sequence of nine abstract photographs with a quotation from Meister Eckhart: "God expects / but one thing of you / and that is / that you should / come out of yourself / insofar as you / are a created being / and let God be God / in you!" That which we perceive as matter is the merest skin of God, a being about whose substance we are no more knowledgeable than of the void of nothingness. We share this skin for a brief while. Our eyes witness a vast horizon, but only in contemplative moments do we experience the totality to which we contribute.
In further developing the theme of contemplative photography we must explore Merton's regard for the visual image, especially the image of "man," and its relation to the image of God. In *The Seven Storey Mountain* Merton criticizes the tendency of western culture to believe that the main goal in the individual's life is to attract the attention and favorable opinion—even applause—of his peers: "A weird life... to be living always in somebody else's imagination, as if that were the only place in which one could at last become real!" Merton, in this passage, is just insofar as our egocentricity lends itself to these extraordinary discrepancies of perception, but his thinking goes beyond the relation of men to each other. In *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton addresses the...
The tension between the individual and the universe, and his words suggest a pictorial expression: "It is possible to speak of the exterior self as a mask: to do so is not necessarily to reprove it. The mask that each man wears may well be a disguise not only for that man's inner self but for God, wandering as a pilgrim and exile in His own creation." We are God's masks—we can acknowledge the indweller; live in total preoccupation with the surface; or we can acknowledge the relation between the indweller and the "vesture" of the surface. "It is as if in creating us God asked a question, and in awakening us to contemplation He answered the question, so that the contemplative is at the same time, question and answer." This engaged intuition is approached
and attained through the disciplined, frustrating, practice of confronting our disunion with God. Contemplative photography embraces the contrast between our union and disunion with God. Our "wisdom in love" intensifies in contrast to our "suffering" of egocentricity.

Merton was a master of the art of verbal portraiture. He speaks to us in an era of technological revolution and world war, and an era in which the tradition of Christianity is submerged in secularity. Merton's own extensive self-portrayal depicts an exemplary quest for spiritual renewal. Concentric to his verbal expression Merton, a painter's son, evidenced a lifelong interest in expressing himself in a visual medium. He made thousands of calligraphic drawings which he described as seeds that "came to life" as "summons to awareness" which may open the way to
Merton also made a lifelong exploration of photography, and he initially despised it almost as much as he later revered it. For Merton, commercial photography was symptomatic of mass conformism to supressive ideologies. On the other hand, toward the end of his life, Merton sensed in photography the potential to communicate with a society generally more conversant with its technological appendages than with its inner self. Photography, he felt, could inspire a reassessment, a dialogue, between the inner-self and the skin of mechanism which technologists busily perfect as man's new, but eternal image—a dialogue which can evolve into a more fulfilling emergence of human potential.
The problems of photography stayed with Merton for many years. At the time of his death he was just beginning to formulate the terms of a solution. The photographic image he regarded as a mental tool, like language. The "best photography" conveys "thought"—"not so much what you saw as what you thought you saw." While Merton was familiar with a wide range of the work of various photographers, it was the Meatyard photographs, coupled with the two men's mutual interest in Zen, that prompted an eventual reassessment of the vital potential of photography. But Meatyard's final influence played no part in the long formative period of Merton's exploration of photography, for Meatyard was just beginning to formulate the terms of a solution.
just born when Merton was ten years old and receiving his first camera.

As an artist’s son, Merton makes this observation: “The integrity of an artist lifts [him] above the level of the world without delivering him from it.” Merton felt that he inherited his father’s way, the artist’s way, of looking at things. Owen Merton’s “vision of the world was . . . full of balance . . . veneration for structure, for the relations of masses and for all the circumstances that impress an individual identity on each created thing.”

Impressed by the example of his father, he believed that the artist’s way of looking at things could, in some measurable way, reform the problematic world. The artist redeems the “individual identity”
of created things by a qualitative isolation and observation.
Although overwhelmed for many years by the momentary
attachments and attractions of the everyday world, Merton
participated in the redemptive act of detachment which informs
contemplative photography.

Merton lived for several years at Douglaston with his maternal
grandparents. His grandfather worked in a publishing house which
specialized in photographic picture books, and Tom spent some
Christmas money on three photographically illustrated volumes.
His experiences with them parallel his later obsession with Mount
Kanchenjunga: ‘I wanted to be in all these places, which the
pictures of Le Pays de France showed me: indeed, it was a kind of
a problem to me and an unconscious source of obscure and half-
realized woe, that I could not be in all of them at once.”

At age eighteen Merton went to Rome trying to reconstruct from the ruins an image in his mind of the ancient city. Besieged by post-card sellers and lost in the ancient and modern maze of fragments, he began to realize that the untouched ruins were probably more beautiful than the original city, which he came to imagine as a monstrosity of institutions and slums. The presence of the city surpassed his anticipation of it through words and pictures. When Merton saw the dome of St. Peter’s, for example, “the realization that it was not a photograph filled me with great awe.” Merton’s wanderlust in Rome led him by chance to discover not only the ruins of the Empire but also the Byzantine mosaics in the churches; he bought a Vulgate Bible so that he
could learn to explore the pictorial meaning of these images more fully. Even after twenty years in a monastery, the influence of Le Pays de France lingered, and the temptation to view, to explore, to "be in all those places" continued to trouble Merton, and his own impulse he recognized as a fully human and perhaps partially worldly one.

Photography is one of the principal mechanisms of propaganda for our image-conscious collective identity, a "society that is imaged in the mass media and in advertising, in the movies, in TV, in best-sellers, in current fads, in all the pompous and trifling masks with which it hides callousness, sensuality, hypocrisy, cruelty, and fear." Merton calls the mutable, superficial appearance of our modern "self" a "mask." We are conditioned and quantified by social and economic forces to shape and conform our appearance and behavior to a common archetype, one often formulated as a myriad of products available for a price. We suppress the awareness of our own "contingency," our "state of radical need," by creating an image of ourselves as one that has no need that cannot be filled. "Because we live in a womb of collective illusion, our freedom remains abortive. Our capacities for joy, peace, and truth are never liberated." In the process of trying to become part of an all-powerful, all-seeing, all-knowing, infinitely-quantifying, formulating, and controlling institution, the individual "becomes part of a mass—mass man—whose only function is to enter anonymously into the process of production and consumption."

Merton argues that our flesh is inevitably "vulnerable to death and demise." Our excessive and futile preoccupation with the perfection of our mask robs us of the more fulfilling and enriching experience of our true inner-selves—the Unmasked, the Unspeakable. "Now if we take our vulnerable shell to be our true identity, if we think our mask is our true face, we will protect it with fabrications even at the cost of violating our own truth." Ultimately Merton resolved the problem of our self-image into layers of spiritual penetration. The mask of our image-conscious culture is an "unprepossessing surface" through which we may patiently "break through to the deep goodness that is underneath." As Merton evolves with this concept, the next layer is the mask of Christ; through that, the mask of God; beyond God the Void of the Absolute.

Merton felt that if the medium of photography could lead a
culture into a material complication of its own suffering, then perhaps this same medium could illustrate or communicate the freedom to be gained from a voluntary path of monastic asceticism. Merton came to identify the suffering of attachments and detachment inherent within the medium of photography with the transfiguring love and suffering of Christ. This same medium through which one’s egocentricity expands and proliferates is turned into an act of meditative surgery revealing and removing the deceits of attachments. For Merton the *photograph* is the ground where one’s suffering becomes “wisdom in love.”

Certain aspects of the structure of the photographic process appear mechanically parallel to elements of monastic life. The monk’s cell is similar to the empty dark chamber of the camera. The monk’s inner focus and exposure to a transfiguring light, his latent retention and gradual development of a mystical experience, is coincidental to the process of exposure and development of a photographic negative or print. The early literature of monastic mysticism developed a vocabulary of Neoplatonic negativism to express an inner vision of the “uncreated Light” and a “darkness clearer than light” expounded by such writers as Dionysius the Areopagite (6th century), Gregorius Palamas (c. 1296-1359), and Meister Eckhart (c. 1260-c. 1327). Aware of this tradition and the coincidence of terms, one of the most pertinent and informative structural components of the photographic process for Merton, is the way in which light is converted into a black emulsion on transparent film so that a new exposure is needed to transfer and fulfill the image’s intended form.

Merton clearly alludes to this dialectic structure of photography to resolve a transference of identity in two related passages where he describes his conception of a union with Christ: “enter into the darkness of interior renunciation, strip your soul of images and let Christ form Himself in you by His Cross”; “There Christ develops your life into Himself like a photograph.” Despite admonishing images Merton’s Christ manifests his presence most veritably in the form of an image. While on the one hand Christ is an image born inside of the individual, the individual is also an image born inside of Christ. In terms of photography the world is like a *negative* image, latent or developed, awaiting the transfiguring illumination of Christ. The accounts of Christ’s own life exemplify a radiant focus that by-passes any tradition or institution which attempts to
A drawing inscribed "for Gene / T. Merton."


Untitled, by Ralph Eugene Meatyard, 1959.
mask or mitigate the will of God. Still photography incises reality as a decision or judgment. For Merton contemplative photography is an awareness of our particular imminent Judgment. With photography, we confront this limit of knowledge, the Unmasked, the Unspeakable, in seeing the desirable photograph through the camera yet choosing not to take it. The medium of the photograph is essentially a mechanism of choice.

The biographer John Howard Griffin said Merton had no interest at all in “ordinary” photography and that he seemed to use it as an instrument or focus for “contemplation.” The act of contemplation itself, as Merton defined it, is an existential abandonment of all prior terms or ideologies. The conceptual ideal of contemplative photography is a focused goal for meditation and it only survives the act of contemplation as an imagistic metaphor. The medium of photography can expose the suffering of one’s identity, and we can apply contemplative insight toward attentive personal revisions of the visible world.

In further communicating contemplative/meditative awareness Merton turned to Zen, which he felt shared something in common with all mediums of spiritual insight. Zen, accompanying traditional forms of Christian expression, has more potential to foster a contemplative enlightenment as well as to take back to the world a meditative method for actualizing the redemption which Christianity has to offer. Merton called the camera that he used a “Zen camera.” Comparing Zen with Catholicism Merton wrote, “one offers man a metaphysical enlightenment, the other a theological salvation. . . . Under the unifying power of the Zen discipline and intuition, art, life, and spiritual experience are all brought together and inseparably fused.” For Merton the “Zen camera” becomes “inseparably fused” with Catholicism. Contemplative photography becomes a vehicle of “metaphysical enlightenment” with the potential to prepare us for “theological salvation.”

Zen is neither theology nor aesthetic tenet. One finds Zen already there, in religion or in artistic expression. Zen is the Absolute and the Non-Absolute. It exists in the world of opposites but is not itself distinct. Merton confronts the problem directly in Zen and the Birds of Appetite, where he elaborates the “embodiment of the Absolute mediated through the personality of the artist. The contribution of Zen to art is then a profound spiritual dimension and transforms art into an essentially
contemplative experience in which it awakens the 'primal' consciousness hidden within us and which makes possible any spiritual activity.”

In his Asian journal Merton wrote of his obsession to photograph Mount Kanchenjunga. He conveys his experience with a kind of naiveté that desires to walk you through the experience. The camera, he says, cannot capture the mountain in a post-card view:


it captures materials with which you reconstruct, not so much what you saw as what you thought you saw. Hence the best photography is aware, mindful, of illusion and uses illusion, permitting and encouraging it—especially unconscious and powerful illusions that are not normally admitted on the scene.

Mount Kanchenjunga is the third highest mountain in the world. It was first scaled by a British team in 1955, which is probably when it entered Merton's imagination, gradually becoming an emotional symbol fusing adventure, physical hardship, perseverance, extreme solitude, and grandeur. While Merton only mentions taking three photographs of the mountain, his negatives reveal that he possibly took two or three dozen of that subject from a wide variety of angles and in widely differing compositions. However, the mountain was far away and Merton was probably frustrated by his inability to convey a feeling of its massive proportions. Merton was nursing a bad cold. He found himself constrained to contend with a mountain that was so far away that it was dwarfed in scale by the trees and buildings in his immediate environment. He was compelled to release his obsession with the mountain and turn his interest to what was more readily accessible in the immediate environment—the shapes of trees, buildings, people.

Merton had lived in many places during his youth, and stimuli such as the photographs which he saw in Le Pays de France inflamed him with an insatiable wanderlust. And at first he wanted to possess what he saw, as one in a sense can in photographs. Modern communication, to be sure, uses photography to seduce us, in the case of advertising, into acquiring a pictured object, and, in the case of news and literary media, to acquire a story behind the photograph. It uses unconscious and powerful illusions
to attract us to the image. It was in response to this that Meatyard used Zen techniques of anti-logical illusion to expose the mechanism of obsessive attraction and to detach, if not repel, the viewer; he fosters contemplative detachment in witnessing the object. We do not have to desire to possess everything we see, nor do we have to desire to re-enact or explain every event. We can experience the past and the present in a mindful and contemplative mode and be free to go forward into an infinite world of new and unrealized possibilities.

Merton and Meatyard seek to cultivate a kind of detached awareness. Merton observes how the oriental style of Zen art deals with detached awareness through abstraction and minimalism. Oriental calligraphy, he writes, "reveals to us something of the freedom which is not transcendent in some abstract and intellectual sense, but which employs a minimum of form without being attached to it, and is therefore free from it." The "Zen camera," with its focus of universal awareness, is a means of experiencing our immediate detachment from visible objects. While the essence of photography is its minimal and abstract grasp of reality, it is more commonly assumed to be a medium of pure factualization. Yet, as Zen makes us aware, once a fact is isolated from the stream of reality, it becomes a misrepresentation, an illusion, a contradiction.

Merton saw in Meatyard's photographs a contemporary and pervasive vehicle for communicating the Zen experience. Meatyard's photography contains what Merton termed "the classic Zen material":

curious anecdotes, strange happenings, cryptic declarations, explosions of illogical humor, not to mention contradictions, inconsistencies, eccentric and even absurd behavior, and all for what? . . . . [T]he paradox and violence of Zen teaching and practice is aimed at blasting the foundation of ready explanation and comforting symbol out from under the discipline's supposed "experience". . . .

The purpose of this seismic confrontation is "to destroy the specious 'reality' in our minds so that we can see directly." When we plunge into photography with this awareness we can begin to contemplate the full, stark contrast of our detachment from reality against the implicit confidence in facts with which we
are born. We can begin to feel the emptiness of the Void that separates surfaces—the sense of the eye, the tympanum of the ear, the touch of the finger. The Zen camera makes Merton a seeing artist and gives him an aesthetic kinship with his artist father, Owen Merton, and with the visionary William Blake, the subject of his graduate thesis at Columbia University, and with his friend and fellow photographer, Ralph Eugene Meatyard.

In *Seeds of Contemplation* Merton cautions that contemplation cannot be taught, just as the Zen masters deny that they are teachers. The awareness is given as a gift, which we can all freely receive if we are receptive. In the Zen tea ceremony the water fills the pot, divides and empties from the pot to fill cups, divides from cups and pours in gifts of life to fill ourselves. The contemplative photograph is given to the "Zen camera," and then is a gift to the eye.
NOTES

17. *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 64.
23. Mott, *Seven Mountains*, 516.